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# CONTENTS

ISSUE 120, MARCH 2024

66

## SOUTH AFRICA

For gourmands and adventurers alike, this diverse nation is bursting with fresh experiences

86

## SCOTLAND

Discover the UK at its most elemental with a journey into the wild heart of the Highlands

98

## ST VINCENT & THE GRENADINES

Culture and conservation on a Caribbean island-hopping tour

110

## KYRGYZSTAN

Exploring the Tian Shan mountains in search of the enigmatic snow leopard

120

## CANADA

Your guide to planning a Canadian road trip, from the wild Yukon to classic British Columbia

132

## BERLIN

Meet the artists and innovators reinventing the German capital's vibrant cultural scene

142

## DUBAI

A hidden history lies behind the ultramodern facade of this grand and luxurious metropolis

# 98 ST VINCENT & THE GRENADINES



# CONTENTS

## Smart traveller

- 15 | SNAPSHOT** The Cretan sea sponge seller of Chania's old harbour
- 16 | BIG PICTURE** Morning breaks on Java's volcanic Mount Bromo
- 19 | PICTURE THIS** France celebrates the birth of impressionism
- 21 | WHAT'S PLAYING** Offbeat music festivals in Petra and beyond
- 23 | FOOD** Rinku Dutt on the flavours of West Bengal
- 25 | ON THE TRAIL** Exploring Nashville's music hotspots
- 27 | WHERE TO STAY** Community-conscious hotels in Zanzibar
- 28 | FAMILY** From jungle to coast in North Queensland, Australia
- 30 | INSIDE GUIDE** History and gastronomy in the city of Dijon
- 33 | STAY AT HOME** Enter the green world of England's New Forest
- 35 | BOOKS** Our pick of the best travel reads released in 2024
- 36 | KIT LIST** Weather the elements with these kayaking essentials
- 39 | COMPETITION** Win a seven-night getaway for two to St Kitts
- 41 | NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR** Dom Joly on Canada's Fogo Island
- 42 | MEET THE ADVENTURER** Louis Alexander on running the world
- 44 | ONLINE** Highlights from [nationalgeographic.com/travel](https://nationalgeographic.com/travel)



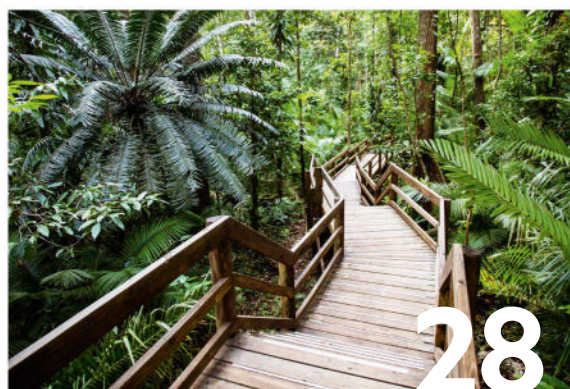
21



58



23



28

## On the cover



The view over Clifton in Cape Town, South Africa  
Image: Getty

## Insider

- 46 | WEEKENDER: MURCIA** River rafting, bar-hopping and empty beaches in one of southeast Spain's most underrated regions
- 52 | EAT: BOGOTÁ** Indigenous ingredients are king in Colombia's fertile, mountain-bound capital
- 58 | SLEEP: HONG KONG** In Asia's 'World City', unforgettable stays come with dazzling dining options and skyline views

## Travel talk

- 152 | ASK THE EXPERTS** Alternative safaris in India, visiting Japan during cherry blossom season and more
- 154 | THE INFO** Get the lowdown on the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan
- 155 | HOT TOPIC** What the volcanic eruptions in Iceland mean for travellers
- 156 | THE REPORT** Can the aviation industry really cut the link between air travel and climate change?

## Get involved

- 171 | SUBSCRIPTIONS** Get seven issues for £15 with our special offer
- 174 | EVENTS** Expect a fresh crop of talent at this year's Food Festival
- 177 | INBOX** Let us know what you think of the magazine to win a great prize each month
- 178 | HOW I GOT THE SHOT** This month, photographer and pearl farmer Josh Humbert discusses the challenges of surf photography



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# CONTRIBUTORS



## Rashmi Narayan

Exploring the city and the region of Murcia, I came across an enchanting blend of medieval history, rugged hills and crystalline blue waters. The wine, gastronomy and vibrant festivals make this underrated gem even more spectacular. **MURCIA P.46**



## Nicholas Gill

With all of its greyness, traffic and grit, Bogotá is one of those cities that you might not fall in love with right away. Then, suddenly, a splash of colourful graffiti here and a local cocktail there, and you start to see the city in a new light. **BOGOTÁ P.52**



## Oliver Smith

I'm a regular visitor to the Scottish Highlands – striding up munros on hiking trips, riding railway lines through heathery glens. This winter I combined the two – taking three days to walk the gap between two of Scotland's greatest railway lines. **SCOTLAND P.86**



## Sarah Barrell

These 32 contrasting islands and cays are an island-hopping idyll of white sand beaches, volcanic peaks and protected coral reefs, where locally run guesthouses offer one of the warmest welcomes in the West Indies. **ST VINCENT & THE GRENADINES P.98**



## Hazel Plush

You can still stroll the alleyways of Al Fahidi, Dubai, where 19th-century pearl traders once built mansions from coral and sandalwood. Now, these carefully restored villas are home to cafes, craft shops and a clutch of delightfully niche museums. **DUBAI P.142**

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# Editor's letter

ISSUE 120, MARCH 2024



The name 'Rainbow Nation' speaks to the rich diversity of South Africa's people, but the country's range of experiences is also vast and varied — with a few surprises thrown in. This issue, we turn our attention to one of the world's most alluring destinations.

While many people come to South Africa to see the Big Five on safari, the country's wealth of wildlife extends far beyond the savannah, ranging from humpback and southern right whales, great white sharks and dolphins to loggerhead and leatherback turtles, baboons and a vast array of native birds.

A road trip along the coastal Garden Route reveals dramatic landscapes that offer up the chance to indulge in the adrenaline rush of zip-wires and bungee jumps. Hiking through the Drakensburg Mountains brings plunging waterfalls, soaring peaks and ancient rock paintings, plus the chance to relax in one of the region's many salubrious retreats when the day is done.

And for the true measure of modern South Africa, take a food tour of Cape Town that reflects the city's diversity, detour into the Swartland wine region and discover Johannesburg's artisanal flair.

Given we've been shivering through sub-zero winter temperatures, is there a more appealing thought right now than escaping to the Southern Hemisphere?

**Pat Riddell, editor**



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BSME Talent Awards 2023: Best Art Team • BSME Talent Awards 2023: Best Picture Editor • TravMedia Awards 2023: Travel Magazine of the Year • AITO Travel Writer of the Year 2022 • VisitEngland Awards for Excellence 2022: Travel Content Award (Gold) • AITO Young Travel Writer of the Year 2021 • LATA Media Awards 2020: Online Consumer Feature of the Year Award • Travel Media Awards 2020: Consumer Writer of the Year • British Travel Awards 2019: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • BGTW Awards 2019: Best Travel Writer • Travel Media Awards 2019: Young Writer of the Year • Travel Media Awards 2019: Specialist Travel Writer of the Year • AITO Travel Writer of the Year 2019 • AITO Young Travel Writer of the Year 2019 • BGTW Awards 2018: Best Travel Writer • Travel Media Awards 2018: Consumer Writer of the Year • British Travel Awards 2017: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine • BGTW Awards 2017: Best Travel Writer • BGTW Awards 2016: Best Travel Writer • British Travel Awards 2015: Best Consumer Holiday Magazine

## DON'T MISS



### USA supplement

Explore the real Wild West, delve into America's diner scene or take a low-carbon tour of Route 66 by electric car. Our new 100-page guide to classic USA in 2024 has all this and more.



### Food Festival 2024

This July, you're invited to taste your way around the world, sampling a range of global produce and soaking up recipe inspiration from a fresh roster of big-name chefs and culinary personalities. **P.174**

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An aerial photograph of a sailboat with a white hull and blue accents, sailing on dark, calm water. The water is dotted with numerous icebergs of various sizes and shapes, some appearing as bright white patches and others as smaller, more irregular chunks. The overall scene is serene and evocative of a polar or high-latitude environment.

**NATIONAL  
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# **PHOTOGRAPHY**

## COMPETITION 2024

The highly esteemed National Geographic Traveller (UK) Photography Competition is now open for entries. Judged by a panel of industry-leading photographers and magazine editors, it's your chance to get your work noticed. Submit images in up to six categories for the opportunity to have your work published within the pages of *National Geographic Traveller* (UK). Have you got what it takes to win?





IMAGE: SAM DAVIES

### **Food & travel**

This category celebrates photography that tells a story from any stage of the culinary journey, from field to fork. Perhaps you'll capture scenes of fishing or a harvest, chefs busy at work at a street-food stall or vendors selling their produce at a local market.

### **People**

Travel portraiture should convey the power and spirit of human connection within a destination. It requires an interesting subject, artfully framed within its environment to reveal something of its unique story.

### **Urban environments**

Your composition should capture the personality of a city or town. You might, for example, choose to show how people live in their urban space, traffic moving past striking architecture or bold street signs and shopfronts.

### **Landscape**

This category is all about offering up unusual perspectives on the natural world. We're looking for plenty of creativity in shots that might, say, show an expanse of landscape or the graphic patterns of an environment revealed from a drone.

### **Wildlife**

Observing animals in their natural habitat is one of the wonders of travel – capturing them on camera can be challenging. This category calls for arresting shots of creatures big or small.

### **Portfolio**

Whether it covers a road trip through Vietnam or an Elvis festival in Nashville, your portfolio of up to 10 images should create a multi-faceted and cohesive story of a single destination.

### **Enter now**

**[NATGEOTV.COM/UK/COMPETITIONS](https://www.natgeotv.com/uk/competitions)**

Competition closes on 25 February 2024 at 11.59pm GMT. The winner must be a resident of the UK or Ireland and aged 18 or over. Judges to be announced. See full T&Cs online.





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# SMART TRAVELLER

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## SNAPSHOT

### Maria Kampouraki, Chania, Crete

On the quieter edge of Chania's old Venetian harbour, among the fishing boats and tavernas, I spotted Maria Kampouraki selling sea sponges from the back of a boat. The warmth and contentment she exuded — her textured wares set against the backdrop of that blue Aegean sea — prompted me to ask for a photo. I snapped two quick shots, purchased a few sponges for myself and then left to go sailing with a friend. For months after, every time I used one of those sponges, I was reminded of the Greek sea and sunshine, of hillsides covered in wild herbs and olive groves stretching far off into the distance.

KASSIE BORRESON • PHOTOGRAPHER

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## BIG PICTURE

**Mount Bromo, Java, Indonesia**

I awoke in the early hours of the morning and hiked up the mountainside to find this view onto Mount Bromo. Arriving in the darkness, with only starlight for illumination, I could barely make out the active volcano's shape in the far distance. Wondering to myself whether this was going to be worth the lack of sleep, I waited until the first rays of light began to pierce the horizon. The sight that emerged stays with me to this day. The conditions were perfect, a brilliant white cloud framing Bromo as it billowed away before us. Every few minutes a new plume of smoke would rise from its broadest cone and I'd quickly snap as many images as I could.

LUKE STACKPOOLE • PHOTOGRAPHER

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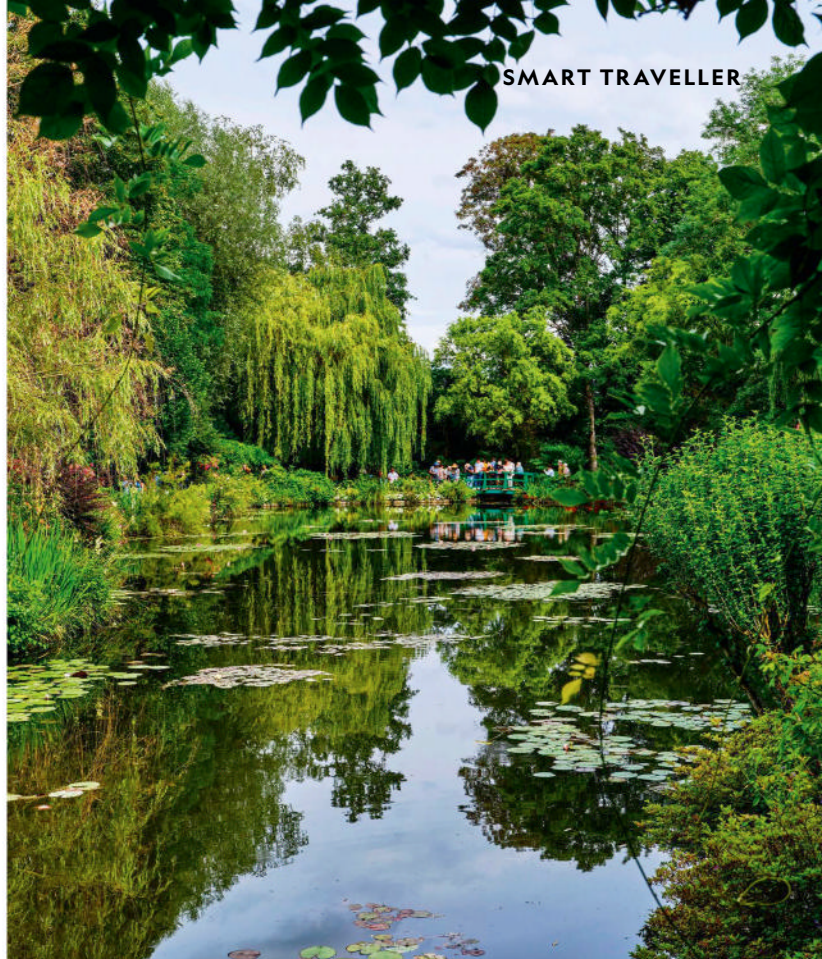
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## FRANCE

# Picture this

CELEBRATE THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF IMPRESSIONISM  
WITH A HOST OF EVENTS ACROSS NORMANDY AND PARIS

It's 150 years since 30 young painters in Paris broke from artistic convention to set up an independent showcase. Their work captured shifting light and colour — a departure from the style of the time, which favoured accurate depictions. Critics were derisive and the public indifferent, but the group — which counted artists such as Monet, Renoir and Degas among its ranks — held what is now seen as the first impressionist exhibition.

Normandy's coastline and countryside inspired some of the most recognisable impressionist works, and fans can mark this year's anniversary at the Normandy Impressionist Festival — a quadrennial event returning for its fifth edition between March and September. Around 150 celebratory events are taking place across the region,

from public installations to guided tours. Highlights include a Whistler retrospective at the Rouen Museum of Fine Arts, and the Impressionism and the Sea exhibition in Giverny, where Monet lived for over 40 years.

In Paris, the Musée d'Orsay is presenting some of the paintings from the original 1874 display — including Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*, which gave the movement its name — alongside more traditional works on show that year, recreating the rift in the French art scene of the 19th century. The exhibition, *Paris 1874. Inventing Impressionism*, will run from March to July before travelling to Washington, DC's National Gallery of Art.

[normandie-impressionniste.fr](https://normandie-impressionniste.fr) [musee-orsay.fr](https://musee-orsay.fr)

ANGELA LOCATELLI

Above from left: The Musée d'Orsay in Paris; Monet's garden in Giverny, Normandy

## 1860S

A Paris-based group of artists discover an interest in painting landscapes and contemporary life, often *en plein air* and with thin, quick strokes. They come to be known as the Batignolles group, after the district where they met up

## 1874

After unsuccessfully battling for recognition from the Salon de Paris, the official showcase of France's Académie des Beaux-Arts, the Batignolles group open a breakaway exhibition to barbed reviews on 15 April

## 1886

The group hold their eighth and final exhibition. By this point, critics and the public have acclimatised to the movement, and the artists — now known as the impressionists — have made a name for themselves

## 1927

The Musée de l'Orangerie opens in Paris as the Musée Claude Monet, a permanent home for the impressionist icon's eight Water Lilies murals, which remain the building's star attractions to this day

## 1986

The Musée d'Orsay opens to bridge the gap between the Louvre and France's National Museum of Modern Art (now known as Centre Pompidou). Today, it holds the world's most extensive collection of impressionist works



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## JORDAN

# WHAT'S PLAYING

A new festival in Jordan is set to take over two of the country's greatest UNESCO sites

Bedouin feasts, visual theatre and electronic music will come together for a festival in the desert canyons of Wadi Rum and the rock city of Petra this spring, allowing travellers to see two of Jordan's most-visited attractions in a completely new light. While much is still under wraps, we can expect something unique from organiser Tithorea, which has created other location-immersive festivals including Costa Rica's Labryinto (28-31 December) in the jungles of Guanacaste and Echoes from Agartha (26-31 July), amid the 'fairy chimneys' of Turkey's Cappadocia region. Jordan's Medaina festival will run 22 to 27 May and is set to become an annual event. The first two days will be based at Petra, providing time to absorb the history of this ancient Nabatean caravan city's tombs and temples. Party-goers will then move to tented camps in Wadi Rum for stargazing, DJ sets and live performances among ochre sand dunes. [tithorea.com](https://tithorea.com) **LISELI THOMAS**

## THREE MORE OUT THERE FESTIVALS

### 1 Detour Discotheque

This annual roving party is set to take on the challenge of becoming 'Europe's highest disco'. Participants will need to take four cable-cars just to reach the venue: a revolving restaurant 2,970 metres high in the Swiss Alps. 10-12 May [detourdisco.com](https://detourdisco.com)

### 2 Great Wall Festival

Returning for the first time in five years, China's two-day Great Wall Festival features a three-mile run and has previously attracted DJs such as Ben Klock and Dave Clarke. May [greatwallfestival.com](https://greatwallfestival.com)

### 3 Gnaoua & World Music Festival

Marking its 25th edition in 2024, this event is a platform for Moroccan *gnaoua* music — a spiritual genre developed by slave descendants in Sub-Saharan Africa — with beach stages and music in the streets of Essaouira. 27-29 June [festival-gnaoua.net](https://festival-gnaoua.net)





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## MUST-TRY DISHES

## KATI ROLL

A fresh paratha flatbread fried on one side and filled with charred chicken and sliced onions. It's drizzled with tomato sauce, chilli sauce and a dash of lime, rolled up and served hot.

## SHORSHE MAACH

White fish fried with turmeric and salt, then simmered in a paste of mustard seeds and chillies. Served with steamed white rice, it's a common dish in most households and restaurants.

## PUCHKA

Also known as *panipuri*, this beloved street snack is a thin, crispy puffed sphere filled with spiced potato and tangy tamarind water. A *puchkawala* makes these fresh, one by one, and they should be eaten whole.

## Essential ingredient

*Kasundi* sauce was originally served with steamed rice and green chillies to start a meal, but now it's an integral part of Bengali cuisine, its earthy flavour adding a punch to fried fish, meat cutlets and beetroot chops (a type of spiced fritter)

Left: Biryani is an aromatic mixed rice dish

## RINKU DUTT

is a cookbook author and co-founder of street food company Raastawala



A TASTE OF

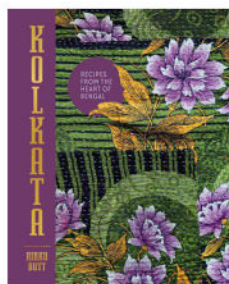
## West Bengal

IN THE NORTHEAST INDIAN STATE – AND PARTICULARLY ITS CAPITAL, KOLKATA – STREET FOOD REIGNS SUPREME

There's a Bengali expression, '*ami machh bhat Bangali*', which means 'I'm a typical Bengali who eats fish and rice'. Located in the Ganges River Delta, Bengal, a historical region between modern-day Bangladesh and India, is perfectly suited to rice cultivation. As for the 'fishy' element, fishing was a primary activity here, and in the northeast Indian state of West Bengal, fish is said to represent prosperity.

Various cultures have left an imprint on the cuisine of Bengal. The Nawab and Mughal dynasties introduced marinated meat, as well as the use of saffron and ghee. These flavours found their way into dishes such as biryani, korma and Kolkata's renowned street foods, including kati rolls — flatbreads wrapped around various fillings and chutneys. They also introduced milk, cardamom and sugar to their desserts, and today, West Bengal is known for its array of sweets.

Arrivals from Europe brought their cuisines, too. The Christian community introduced the ritual of tea, while baking became widespread



after the arrival of the British, as did chops and pound cakes. From the 18th century onwards, West Bengal became home to large numbers of Marwaris (a Rajasthani ethnic group) and Chinese people; the former introduced a range of vegetarian dishes, while the latter spiced up Cantonese dishes with hot sauces and chillies, with

the likes of chilli chicken and chow mein becoming favourites in the state.

Bengali cuisine is packed with colour. During Durga Puja, West Bengal's biggest festival, the goddess Durga is offered a bright yellow *khichdi* (a preparation of rice and daal) accompanied by various vegetable curries made without onion and garlic. But whether it's the contrasting shades in the fruit and vegetable markets or the jars of yellow turmeric and pink rock salt that line home kitchens, you can expect vibrant hues all year round. *Kolkata: Recipes from the Heart of Bengal*, by Rinku Dutt, is published by Smith Street Books (£26).



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## ON THE TRAIL

## NASHVILLE

From legendary honky tonks to intimate acoustic venues, immerse yourself in the soulful rhythms of America's 'Music City'



### 3 ROBERT'S WESTERN WORLD

By now, you'll have earned a drink and bite to eat. Thankfully, you're just around the corner from Nashville's heart: Honky Tonk Highway, a historic strip of dive bars, cocktail lounges and multi-storey clubs on Broadway pumping out live music night and day. For an authentic experience, head to this unfussy cowboy bar and order a bologna (sausage) sandwich and cold beer. [robertswesternworld.com](http://robertswesternworld.com)

### 4 JOHNNY CASH MUSEUM

Meet the 'Man in Black' at the world's largest and most comprehensive museum paying homage to country legend Johnny Cash, two minutes' walk off Broadway on Third Avenue South. Inside the museum, interactive exhibits, personal artefacts and memorabilia tell the story of the country icon chronologically, from the early years and air force employment to his personal life and music success. [johnnycashmuseum.com](http://johnnycashmuseum.com)

### 1 THE RYMAN AUDITORIUM

Begin at this rock 'n' roll landmark, a concert hall and the original home of the Grand Ole Opry — America's longest-running radio show, founded in 1925, which brought country music into US homes, saw the birth of bluegrass and launched countless country stars. Opt for the self-guided tour to take in the exhibits at your own pace or sign up for the guided backstage tour; better yet, come back in the evening to attend a live show. [ryman.com](http://ryman.com)

### 2 NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC

Opened in 2021, this one-of-a-kind museum across the road from the Ryman took two decades to complete and covers music that was 400 years in the making. It celebrates African Americans' contribution to the musical landscape in six galleries, curated to share a unique perspective on over 50 musical genres — from the golden age of gospel and humble beginnings of blues to the evolution of R&B. [nmaam.org](http://nmaam.org)

### 5 COUNTRY MUSIC HALL OF FAME AND MUSEUM

Next take a further five-minute walk two blocks south west. Carl Perkins' blue suede shoes, Elvis's gold-trimmed Cadillac, Shania Twain's leopard-print catsuit — you'll find these and much more at this behemoth museum. It explores the near-biblical importance of country music to Nashville's soul, with exhibits, songwriting sessions and the city's own Hall of Fame. [countrymusicHalloffame.org](http://countrymusicHalloffame.org)

### 6 STATION INN

A 20-minute walk away via Demonbreun Street, this humble dive bar is proudly different from the chic Gulch district it's part of. The concept is simple: cash entry, cheap beer, unfussy pizza and some of the world's best bluegrass music, seven nights a week. Seating is first-come, first-served, so arrive early or be prepared to join the battalion of loyal customers who've brought their own folding seats. [stationinn.com](http://stationinn.com)  
**SACHA SCOGING**





## A Gastronomic Oasis by the Sea

THE BIGGEST BEACH CLUB IN THE WORLD AND THE BIGGEST NIGHTCLUB IN BALI UNVEIL AN ENTICING SELECTION OF SIGNATURE DISHES AND DRINKS.

Prepare your taste buds for their pièce de résistance – Grilled Octopus. It's a must-try for those with a penchant for seafood with local herbs. Catering to the growing demand for plant-based options, Atlas presents gado-gado, an Indonesian vegan delight featuring tropical vegetables, proteins and Indonesian peanut sauce.

Later on, continue the night with Houdini The Magician and The Flamettes — these mystical concoctions are served not only with dramatic presentation but with tasting notes that add an element of fire to the night.

[www.atlasbeachfest.com](http://www.atlasbeachfest.com)

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WHERE TO STAY

# Zanzibar

FORWARD-THINKING HOTELS ON TANZANIA'S 'SPICE ISLAND' ARE PUTTING LOCALS FIRST

## LUX\* Marijani

Zanzibar has long been popular among travellers returning from safaris and Kilimanjaro climbs. But with an increase in international flight routes making it more accessible than ever, the Tanzanian island is coming to be seen as more than just a fly-and-flop destination. Now, new hotels like LUX\* Marijani — opened in July 2023 on the island's palm-fringed northeast coast — are working to support the island's tight-knit communities and celebrate its rich cultural heritage.

The property's whitewashed facade is a reminder of the Arabic influence so prominent throughout Zanzibar; the sultans of Oman ruled over the island for almost 200 years, and in the hotel's two restaurants, Middle Eastern spices such as clove, cinnamon and nutmeg are given pride of place. There's The Beach — with dishes such as a rich, aromatic octopus curry — and Samāa, a new, open-air Levantine restaurant specialising in vegetarian sharing plates. Drinks are local, too: there's even a weekly pop-up bar featuring craft *konyagi*, a Tanzanian spirit distilled from sugarcane.

Marijani's 82 rooms feature hand-carved wooden furniture and brass accents. Locally crafted terrazzo tiles lead to solar-powered rainfall showers, while balconies overlook the sea or the surrounding gardens — kept lush with recycled grey water. Approximately 80% of staff members are local, and the hotel provides beach space for seaweed drying racks, used to prepare the ocean crop for use in everything from soaps to herbal remedies. From US\$312 (£248), B&B. [luxresorts.com](https://luxresorts.com)

From top: The pool at LUX\* Marijani overlooks the Indian Ocean; one of the bungalow terraces at Zuri Zanzibar; Emerson Spice's Belle Room

## Emerson Spice

This restored merchant's house is well situated for travellers looking to explore the teahouses and bazaars of Zanzibar City's historic Stone Town. The hotel is decorated with works by local artists, while the rooftop restaurant highlights indigenous ingredients and hosts performances by local musicians. From US\$225 (£179), B&B. [emersonzanzibar.com](https://emersonzanzibar.com)

## Blue Oyster Hotel

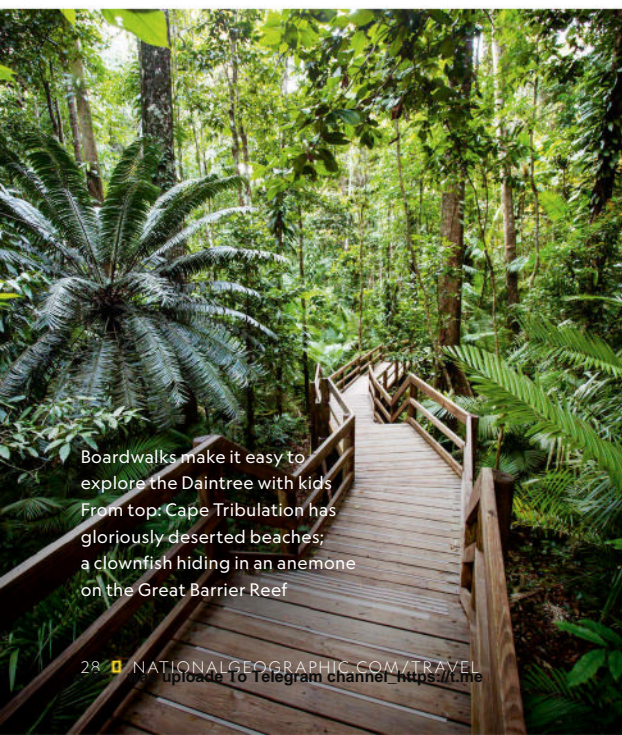
This family-run hotel is a mainstay of Jambiani Beach, on the island's southwest coast. The rooms are quietly luxurious, with canopied beds and sea or garden views. Prices are affordable and Blue Oyster redirects funding back into the community, providing space on-property for local masseuses and craftswomen. From US\$125 (£100), B&B. [blueoysterhotel.com](https://blueoysterhotel.com)

## Zuri Zanzibar

Dotted along Kendwa Beach, on Zanzibar's northwest coast, Zuri Zanzibar's thatch-roofed suites and villas open onto terraces surrounded by tropical gardens, merging with the surrounding environment thanks to carefully integrated, minimal-impact design. The hotel also provides local schoolchildren with reliable access to education, including lessons in English and computer skills. From US\$468 (£372), half board. [zurizanzibar.com](https://zurizanzibar.com) **SUMMER RYLANDER**







Boardwalks make it easy to explore the Daintree with kids. From top: Cape Tribulation has gloriously deserted beaches; a clownfish hiding in an anemone on the Great Barrier Reef

## FAMILY

# ESCAPE TO THE WILD

Northern Queensland's rainforest and reef offer an Australian family adventure like no other

## Kuranda

Getting to the arts and crafts hub of Kuranda, a mountain town surrounded by rainforest, is half the fun for families. Departing from Cairns, the 4.7-mile Skyrail cable car skims over the tropical canopy of the oldest rainforest on the planet, with opportunities to spy tree kangaroos, and spectacular views of the mountains and ocean. Kuranda itself has heritage markets, walking trails and a butterfly sanctuary to explore. For the return journey to Cairns, board the Kuranda Scenic Railway. Built in the late 19th century, the train winds its way back down to sea level through the forest, passing waterfalls and gorges. [skyrail.com.au](http://skyrail.com.au) [ksr.com.au](http://ksr.com.au) [tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au](http://tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au)

## Great Barrier Reef

The laid-back town of Port Douglas — an hour's drive north of Cairns along the coastal highway — is a good jumping-off point for family tours of the reef. The Low Isles coral cays are an easier outing for smaller children, but older kids should head to the outer reef for snorkelling with clearer waters, more varied sea life and rich coral gardens. Beyond the shoals of multicoloured fish, families might spy sea turtles, giant clams and reef sharks. Try Sailaway, which runs boat tours accompanied by marine biologists. All ages are catered for, as long as children can swim. [sailawayportdouglas.com](http://sailawayportdouglas.com)

## Mossman Gorge

For a deeper understanding of the region, visit this spectacular and accessible pocket of the Daintree National Park, owned and managed by the Kuku Yalanji community. The Cultural Centre offers self-guided walks, but for a more intimate connection with the land and Indigenous culture, take a guided Ngadiku Dreamtime Walk through the rainforest to hear the stories of the Aboriginal people who have lived here for thousands of years. Kids will also learn about the area's cassowaries — the third-largest bird in the world — and the useful properties of rainforest plants. [mossmangorge.com.au](http://mossmangorge.com.au)

## Cape Tribulation

This coastal strip 60 miles north of Cairns is where northern Queensland starts to get really wild. Take a zero-emission boat cruise on the Daintree River with small operator Solar Whisper in search of 'salties' — Australia's giant saltwater crocodiles. Boats keep a safe distance and local guides will also scan the rainforest waterways for birds, bats, snakes and frogs. Other highlights include the Daintree Discovery Centre's 36ft-high walkway, and the Treetops Adventure at Cape Tribulation — about as far north as you can drive without a 4WD — which offers a two-hour ziplining tour 50 feet above ground through the forest. It's suitable for kids as young as three. [solarwhisper.com](http://solarwhisper.com) [discoverthedaintree.com](http://discoverthedaintree.com) [treetopsadventure.com.au](http://treetopsadventure.com.au)

## Where to stay

Within easy walking distance of almost everything in Cairns, Crystalbrook Bailey has rooms and apartments ideal for family stays. The two-bedroom units come with a lounge area and kitchen, while the outdoor swimming pool provides a welcome respite after days spent exploring. The city's Esplanade, with its playgrounds, parklands and restaurants, is just a few minutes away, as is Cairns' popular Night Markets for street food. From A\$185 (£98), room only. [crystalbrookcollection.com/bailey](http://crystalbrookcollection.com/bailey) **PAT RIDDELL**



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## INSIDE GUIDE

# DIJON

BURGUNDY'S WINE-SOAKED MEDIEVAL CAPITAL HAS LONG BEEN A CRADLE OF INVENTION, ART AND GASTRONOMY

There are many reasons to visit the capital of France's Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region — not least its setting amid the Burgundy vineyards, its gastronomic legacy and its wealth of history and art. Once part of the Roman Empire and capital of the Duchy of Burgundy from the 10th to 15th century, Dijon has a pedestrianised, UNESCO-listed historic heart with many medieval townhouses, Renaissance-style mansions and romanesque and gothic landmarks. Several of its museums have started offering free entry in recent years, while contemporary art has been integrated into outdoor public areas. In 2022, the opening of Dijon's Cité Internationale de la Gastronomie et du Vin — a wine education, retail and leisure complex — also brought new energy to the city.

Several centuries of the city's past are represented across the **Palace of the Dukes of Burgundy** complex. Climb the 316 ancient stone steps to the top of its 150ft-high **Tour Philippe le Bon** for panoramic views over the city. Afterwards, explore the palace's **Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon**, whose walls are covered with medieval masterpieces and contemporary art. Founded in 1787, it reopened in 2019 after a 10-year renovation. [beaux-arts.dijon.fr](https://beaux-arts.dijon.fr)

From here, stroll to the 13th-century **Church of Notre-Dame of Dijon** to marvel at the automaton clock atop its south tower and search for the famous owl — a small medieval carving that's regarded as a good luck charm and symbol of the city. Join the locals and tourists who gather here to make a wish while rubbing it with their left hand.

Rue de la Chouette (Owl Street) is on the north side of the church and it's here you'll find boutique-atelier **La Moutarderie Fallot**, which makes its legendary Dijon mustard using a grindstone. Tastings of the original are offered alongside newer creations that introduce flavours such as blackcurrant. Further along the street is **Maison Millière**, a 1483 former merchant house that's now a

restaurant, wine bar and tea room. It served as a backdrop for the 1990 Gérard Depardieu film *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

[fallot.com](https://fallot.com) [maison-milliere.fr](https://maison-milliere.fr)

To sample more of Dijon's celebrated products, head to the **Les Clos Vivants** wine shop. It hosts daily tastings of Burgundy wines along with another French favourite, the blackcurrant liqueur crème de cassis, which originates from Dijon. Also don't miss **Les Halles Market**, where local producers sell cheeses, snails and all manner of baked goods in a cavernous wrought-iron structure designed by Dijon-born engineer Gustave Eiffel. [lesclosvivants.fr](https://lesclosvivants.fr)

Walk down the main shopping street Rue de la Liberté, lined with 15th-century buildings and home to a satellite branch of Paris's high-end **Galleries Lafayette** department store. The thoroughfare leads to Dijon's first public garden, the 19th-century **Jardin Darcy**, a verdant pocket of ponds and waterfalls that's worth a stroll. You can get park snacks from nearby **Mulot & Petitjean**, a heritage store specialising in gingerbread that's made according to a traditional recipe — Dijon's cake-like gingerbread is famed across France. [gallerieslafayette.com](https://gallerieslafayette.com) [mulotpetitjean.com](https://mulotpetitjean.com)

It's a 20-minute walk south to Dijon's newest cultural and gastronomic hub, **Cité Internationale de la Gastronomie et du Vin**. Ten years in the making and partially housed in a grand former hospital, it offers interactive exhibits on French gastronomy and wine, tasting experiences and workshops plus a wealth of shops, restaurants and bars to hop between. [tdb-cdn.com/citedelagastronomie-dijon.fr](https://tdb-cdn.com/citedelagastronomie-dijon.fr)

For a place to stay, try **Mama Shelter** on the edge of the historic centre, which opened its Dijon branch in 2023. Stylish rooms and an in-house cinema and bar-restaurant are complemented by painted ceiling murals that take inspiration from local attractions such as Burgundy's vineyards. [mamashelter.com/dijon](https://mamashelter.com/dijon) **LAUREN JADE HILL**

### LIKE A LOCAL

#### Adrien Tirelli's guide to Dijon for wine lovers

Adrien is maître caviste (wine merchant) of Les Clos Vivants wine shop in Dijon



#### CAVEAU DE SAULX

This wine bar near Place de la République hosts blind tastings and also pairs wines with food, all in an atmospheric 16th-century cellar. Old vintages are the bar's speciality. [lecaveaudeaulx.fr](https://lecaveaudeaulx.fr)

#### BRUNO

Bruno has one of the best and most eclectic cellars in the city. It has a very French, local ambience — to meet owner Bruno Crouzat-Reynes is to meet one of Dijon's true characters. [zelift.com/bruno](https://zelift.com/bruno)

#### LA CAVE SE REBIFFE

This tiny wine bar has bottles from Burgundy and beyond and serves small bites such as charcuterie and cheese, along with cocktails. [instagram.com/lacaveserebiffe21](https://instagram.com/lacaveserebiffe21)





An XXL room with views of the city at Mama Shelter  
Clockwise from left: Gingerbread cake from Mulot & Petitjean; Dijon's historic core is UNESCO-listed; Burgundy's wines can be sampled at local cellar doors and city wine bars





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STAY AT HOME

# BEAULIEU

Roam the New Forest National Park, explore medieval abbey ruins or curl up with a fireside pint in this scenic Hampshire village

## Why go?

The Cistercian monks who founded an abbey on this spot in the 13th century and named it Beau Lieu ('beautiful place') would be pleased to know that the village that grew up around it lives up to the name. Sitting on a bend of the Beaulieu River, on the southern edge of the New Forest, this is a place of gentle charms — not least thanks to the regular appearance of the wild donkeys and horses for which the region is known. The village consists largely of a single main street, with brick-and-timber cottages housing antique, homeware and produce stores.

## What to do

Beaulieu is an excellent base for walks and cycles through the varied landscapes of the 219sq-mile New Forest National Park, made all the more attractive under a layer of winter frost. Closer to home, the Beaulieu Estate is within a 20-minute walk of the village. Among its attractions is the National Motor Museum, with exhibits including the Ford Anglia that featured in the Harry Potter films and the Bluebird Proteus CN7, which broke the land speed record in 1960. Also within the extensive grounds are an annually changing sculpture park (summer only); the Victorian stately pile of Palace House; and the remains of the medieval Beaulieu Abbey. [newforestnpa.gov.uk](http://newforestnpa.gov.uk) [beaulieu.co.uk](http://beaulieu.co.uk)

## Where to eat

Local produce is at the heart of the two options at The Montagu Arms Hotel. Convivial, wood-panelled Monty's Inn serves elevated pub food such as wild boar and apple sausages with mustard mash. The Terrace Restaurant, meanwhile, offers views over the garden and fine-dining dishes such as wild Hampshire partridge, and New Forest beetroot with goat's cheese mousse. [montaguarmshotel.co.uk](http://montaguarmshotel.co.uk)

## Don't miss

A two-mile stroll along Beaulieu River leads to the village of Buckler's Hard, which originated as an 18th-century shipbuilding location. Its pretty terraces once housed the tradesmen who built prestigious seafaring vessels such as those used by Admiral Nelson in the Battle of Trafalgar, and a museum traces the village's maritime history. Call in for a fireside pint at the Master Builder's House hotel before heading back. [bucklershard.co.uk](http://bucklershard.co.uk)

## We like

Beaulieu is well stocked with speciality food shops. Try Bellord & Brown for deli items such as local cheese and pies; Beaulieu Farm Shop for venison and Dexter beef; and the Beaulieu Chocolate Studio for all things cocoa-based. [bellordandbrown.com](http://bellordandbrown.com) [beaulieufarmshop.co.uk](http://beaulieufarmshop.co.uk) [beaulieuchocolatestudio.co.uk](http://beaulieuchocolatestudio.co.uk) **AMANDA CANNING**



## WHERE TO STAY

There's been an inn on the site of The Montagu Arms Hotel since the 16th century, and a sense of history pervades, with oak flooring, lead-lined windows and brick fireplaces among the original features. There are 22 country-style rooms and suites in the main house, with nine more guest rooms and two suites in the garden, each featuring a private terrace and standalone bath. From £160, B&B. [montaguarmshotel.co.uk](http://montaguarmshotel.co.uk)

Above: Some of the New Forest's free-roaming horses, grazing in the mist



# Visit **HARFORD** MARYLAND

Harford County, Maryland is located on the shores of the scenic Chesapeake Bay. The vibrant area offers visitors picturesque beauty, bustling urban centres, historic harbour towns and a variety of world-class cultural and sports amenities.



[VisitHarford.com](http://VisitHarford.com)





## BOOKS

# Top travel reads 2024

FROM EPIC TRAVELOGUES AND NATURE WRITING TO A PIONEERING TRAVEL PUBLISHER'S MEMOIR, THESE TITLES WILL INSPIRE ADVENTURE THIS YEAR

## 1 Local: A Search for Nearby Nature and Wilderness

Alastair Humphreys spent a year examining every square metre of a 12-mile radius around his home in suburban England. Humphreys is a former National Geographic Adventurer of the Year, and his latest book is a celebration of slowing down and discovering a wild, wonderful world on your doorstep. It's also a rallying cry to revitalise Britain's natural spaces and reclaim our right to roam in them. *Eye Books, £12.99*

## 2 Taking the Risk: My Adventures in Travel and Publishing

Hilary Bradt's eponymous guidebook company championed slow and low-impact travel long before the concepts were widespread. The publisher celebrates its 50th anniversary this year; over the half century, it's produced guidebooks to the remotest parts of the planet. Bradt's memoir looks back at a lifetime of trials, triumphs and following the lesser-known trail. *Bradt, £20*

## 3 To the City: Life and Death Along the Ancient Walls of Istanbul

This is a deep dive into Turkey's largest city, by journalist Alexander Christie-Miller. Miller journeys on foot in and around Istanbul's ancient city walls, piecing together the jigsaw puzzle of its identity on the fringes of Europe and Asia. Between the ancient minarets that punctuate the city's skyline, the author seeks out the real soul of Istanbul in its diverse peoples, past and present, by raising up voices rarely heard. *Harper Collins, £25*

## 4 Wilder Journeys: True Stories of Nature, Adventure & Connection

This collection of original non-fiction stories, illustrations and poems examining the human connection with nature is penned by travellers, wildlife lovers and adventurers from across the globe. Take a walk across the desert with explorer Angela Maxwell, discover how former hermit Gregory Smith survived for 10 years in an Australian forest and learn how activist David Malana set up a surf school for people of colour in California. *Watkins Publishing, £14.99*

## 5 Vagabond

Mark Eveleigh brings the pioneering spirit of adventure previously seen in his travel books on Southeast Asia to the back roads of Spain. The author spent five weeks walking 761 miles across the Iberian Peninsula, taking in blistering sun-beaten plains, grey stone villages hung with mist, and vast chains of mountains. The result is a homage to the disappearing lifestyle of the *vagabundo*, as well as a celebration of rural Spain and its remote communities. *Summersdale, £10.99*

## 6 Globetrotting: Writers Walk the World

Author Duncan Minshull's collection of over 50 travelogues from diverse writers aims to answer the question: why explore on foot? Reading it is to take a literary stroll, from the streets of London to the jungles of Ghana. Spanning seven continents, stories date back to the 1500s and take in lesser-known writers, along with the likes of Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, Mark Twain, Isabella Bird and William Boyd. *Notting Hill Editions, £15.99*



## KIT LIST

## KAYAKING

Weather whatever the elements throw at you with these waterproof essentials for river, lake and sea adventures

**1 HELLY HANSEN RIDER VEST**

Light and unrestrictive, this ISO-certified buoyancy aid combines safety with comfort. The reinforced back provides support on extended outings, while the front features a pocket for emergency flares — ideal for precautions if taking excursions on rougher waters. Available in red, ebony, blue and yellow. £55. [hellyhansen.com](https://hellyhansen.com)

**2 GILL PRO GLOVES**

These water-repellent kayaking gloves incorporate grippy fabric on the palms and fingers, lessening the chances of your paddle slipping through your hands. The ergonomic design and abrasion-resistant fabric also make them comfortable enough to wear for extended periods. Available in short- and long-finger styles. £44. [gillmarine.com](https://gillmarine.com)

**3 OSPREY WILDWATER DRY BAG**

This waterproof dry bag protects your valuables without the need for a bulky backpack. It's crafted from 100% recycled nylon, fitted with two D-rings for fastening extra equipment and also features a shoulder strap for quick access to supplies. Available in five sizes, with capacities of eight litres up to 50 litres. £45-£70. [osprey.com](https://osprey.com)

**4 TILLEY RAIN HAT**

Designed to keep you dry on rainy days and sunburn-free on hot ones, this wide-brim, water-resistant hat offers UV protection and comes with an adjustable chin strap so it stays put in even the squalliest weather. Moisture-wicking fabric means a sweat-free brow, while the membrane helps to regulate your body temperature. £95. [uk.tilley.com](https://uk.tilley.com)

**5 YAK APOLLO JACKET**

With this dual-layer kayaking cagoule, complete with a hi-vis storm hood, you're fully protected from the elements while paddling. Sealed cuffs stop water from flushing up the sleeves as you paddle, and the fleece-lined collar features a breathable vent, reducing unpleasant moisture build-up. £158. [crewsaver.com](https://crewsaver.com)

**6 VIVOBAREFOOT HYDRA ESC FOOTWEAR**

Keen to combine paddling with a bit of shoreline exploration? These amphibious trainers are a must. Puncture resistant and fitted with a foam insole made from algae biomass, Vivobarefoot's Hydra Esc provide protection from jagged rocks and solid grip on slippery surfaces. Available in obsidian or sea green. £165. [vivobarefoot.com](https://vivobarefoot.com)

**7 SEVYLOR ADVENTURE KIT INFLATABLE KAYAK**

This pack-down two-person vessel is a good option for those lacking storage space. It features removable seats, integrated spray decks to stop water entering the kayak and bungee cords for storing dry bags and extra clothing. The whole thing fits inside a handy bag — perfect for day trips to the coast. £399.99. [sevylor-europe.com](https://sevylor-europe.com)

**8 PALM MAVERICK PRO 4-PIECE PADDLE**

The fibreglass shaft of this all-rounder paddle makes it light and easy to handle, while the broad, reinforced nylon blades help produce powerful strokes. It can also be broken down into four pieces for stowing. Available in lengths of 197cm and 220cm. £170. [palmequipement-europe.com](https://palmequipement-europe.com)

**SAM KEMP**

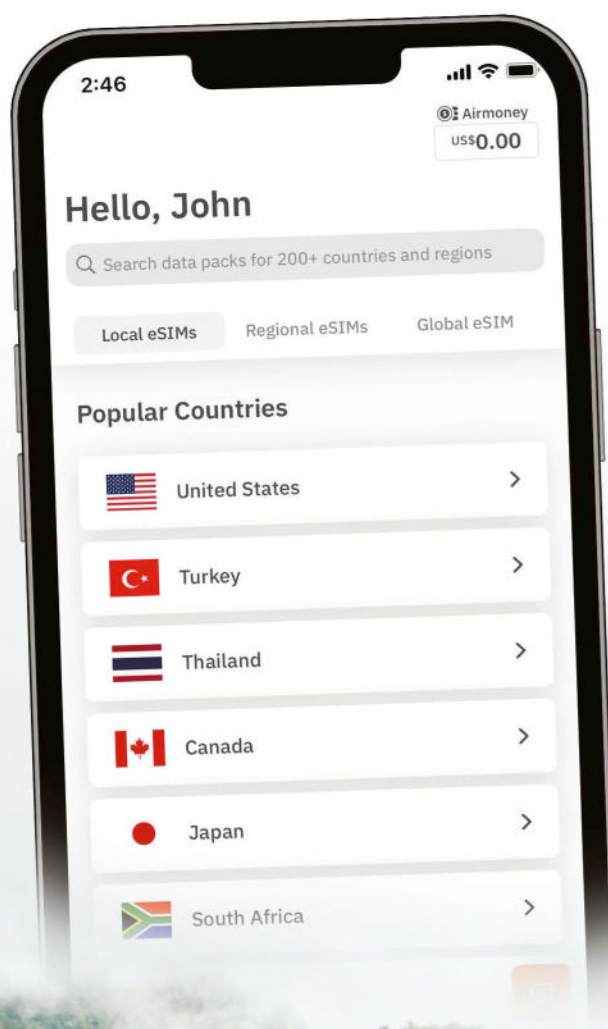




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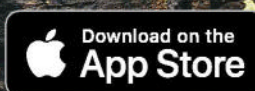


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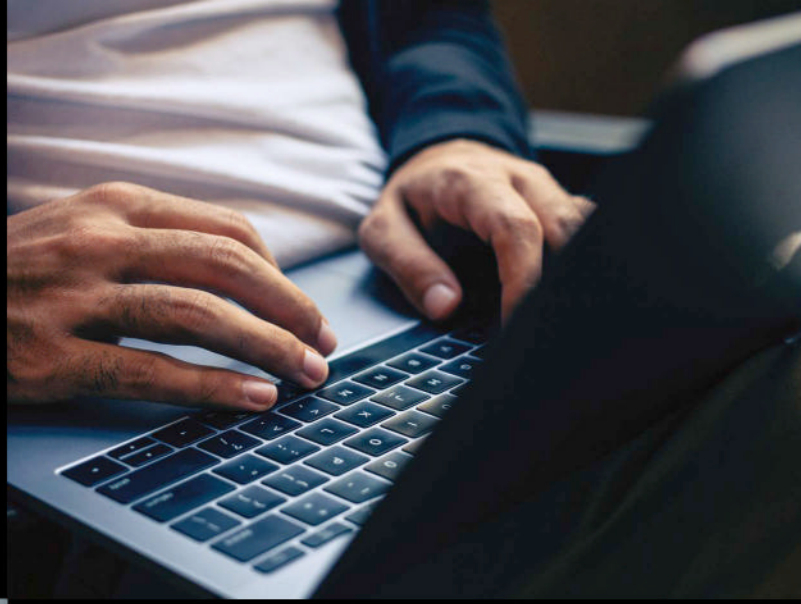


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WIN

# A SEVEN-NIGHT TRIP TO ST KITTS FOR TWO

*National Geographic Traveller* (UK) has teamed up with the St Kitts Tourism Authority and Inspiring Travel to offer a luxury getaway

## THE DESTINATION

With 18 miles of green mountains and one of the world's only expanding rainforests, St Kitts is a Caribbean destination with a twist. Its location between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea gives its beaches distinctively varied hues, from alluring golden to volcanic black. Visitors can zip line above the rainforest for a thrilling adventure, ride the 'Last Railway in the West Indies', discover the UNESCO-listed Brimstone Hill Fortress and even become a Kittitian rum master. Enjoy it all from the island's premier luxury resort, Park Hyatt St Kitts Christophe Harbour, where guests can take a dip in one of two swimming pools, relax in the stylish spa, dine in a choice of three signature restaurants and sip a cocktail while soaking up sunset views of neighbouring Nevis. [parkhyattstkitts.com](https://parkhyattstkitts.com)

## THE PRIZE

Courtesy of the St Kitts Tourism Authority and luxury tour operator Inspiring Travel, the winner and a guest will enjoy a seven-night stay in a double room at Park Hyatt St Kitts on a room-only basis. The prize includes return economy British Airways flights from Gatwick and return airport transfers in St Kitts. Celebrating 50 years' experience in creating bespoke trips, Inspiring Travel offers concierge-style service and 24/7 support while on the go. Blackout dates apply. [visitstkitts.com](https://visitstkitts.com) [inspiringtravel.co.uk](https://inspiringtravel.co.uk)



From top: St Kitts' southeast peninsula; a pool at Park Hyatt St Kitts; Reggae Beach on the south coast

## TO ENTER

Answer the following question online at [natgeotv.com/uk/competitions](https://natgeotv.com/uk/competitions)

WHAT'S THE NAME OF THE UNESCO-LISTED FORTRESS ON ST KITTS?

Competition closes on 31 March 2024. The winner must be a UK resident and aged 18 or over. Full T&Cs at [natgeotv.com/uk/competitions](https://natgeotv.com/uk/competitions)







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NOTES FROM AN AUTHOR

## DOM JOLY

Canada's remote Fogo Island feels like the end of the world.  
And for some people, it is

We've all been on some extreme trips. But how many of us can claim to have travelled to the very edge of the world? I can... sort of. Allow me to explain.

I made several trips for my latest book *The Conspiracy Tourist*, but the strangest was undoubtedly to the island of Fogo, off Canada's Newfoundland coast. I was looking into flat Earth theory: the idea that the Earth is a flat, round disk, surrounded by an ice wall. When I dived deeper, I discovered a splinter group of people who not only believe that the Earth is flat, but that it's square. Logically, in their eyes, this means that there are four corners: Hydra in Greece, Papua New Guinea, the Bermuda Triangle and Fogo Island.

So, this was why I found myself on a road trip from St John's, the capital of Newfoundland, to Fogo. I was accompanied by John, a square-flat-earthier with a love of the band Rush, which made the trip feel longer than it actually was.

To get to Fogo Island from St John's involves driving through Gander, where you really must call into the airport. Back in the 1950s, Gander Airport was a big deal as the place transatlantic flights stopped to refuel. Locals hung out at the airport every night hoping to spot The Beatles, Marilyn Monroe or Frank Sinatra sitting at the bar waiting to travel on.

Once technology made the stopovers redundant, this beautiful passenger terminal became frozen in time, like a *Mad Men* set. Even now, Eames chairs sit expectantly in the ladies' powder room patiently awaiting the return of famous bottoms.

Moving on, we took the ferry to Fogo from the wonderfully named Farewell Harbour. After an hour and half, we arrived at our final destination. Fogo is tiny, with a population of just over 2,000 people. Think the Falkland Islands but inhabited by fishermen with accents that are a curious mix of Irish and West Country, a haunting link to their ancestors, who first landed here in the 17th century in search of fishy treasure. Almost every weather-beaten house has a slightly off-kilter hut suspended just above the water on thin wooden stilts. Back in the day, these would have been used to dry the fish, but the fishing industry was shut down in 1992 when cod stocks ran out.

The local economy was saved by a lady called Zita Cobb, an islander who made a lot of money in Toronto during the tech boom.



She decided to return to Fogo to set up a charity called Shorefast, which aimed to both revive culture on the island and reinvent the economy. To do this, she built a quite extraordinary hotel, Fogo Island Inn, designed by Canadian architect Todd Saunders. It sits like a vast beached ocean liner on stilts and is one of the most beautiful buildings I've ever visited. The hotel employs lots of locals and uses a wide array of local products, and rooms don't come cheap: from \$1,975 (£1,167) a night.

But I wasn't on Fogo for its luxury tourism. I was on a serious expedition to discover the edge of the Earth. So, after a brief visit to the Flat Earth Museum, one of the world's least impressive scientific institutions, we drove to the far end of the island, to Fogo village itself. Looming ominously above the wooden houses in the grey bay below it was Brimstone Head, a giant lump of weathered granite. Once we'd climbed this, we could supposedly gaze over the edge of the Earth and glimpse the ice wall.

Half an hour later, after a bracing but not arduous climb, we hit the summit. We gazed out expectantly... at the sea, which stretched to the horizon. No sign of the edge.

John was more than disappointed. He decided we needed a boat to explore further. So we found one. With a storm brewing, the captain told us we had an hour before things became unsafe. These, after all, are the treacherous waters that sank the *Titanic*. We headed out and found nothing but endless sea.

John became angry. He accused both the captain and myself of being in league with Bill Gates and claimed that we were simply going around in circles to confuse him. My life flashed before me. I had visions of my epitaph should this go pear-shaped: 'Comedian drowned by enraged flat-earthier yards from the edge of the world'. What with me being something of a professional prankster, people probably wouldn't even believe it.

It's not easy being an intrepid explorer. But it does allow you to meet people of all persuasions, and make your own conclusions about the weird and wonderful world we all live in. A place that, for now at least, we can all still travel around... or across.

**“Fogo is tiny, with a population of just over 2,000 people. Think the Falkland Islands but inhabited by fishermen with accents that are a curious mix of Irish and West Country, a haunting link to their ancestors, who first landed here in search of fishy treasure**

*The Conspiracy Tourist: Travels Through a Strange World* by Dom Joly is published by Robinson, £22.

For tickets to *Dom Joly: The Conspiracy Tour 2024* stage show visit: [domjoly.tv](https://domjoly.tv)



## MEET THE ADVENTURER

# Louis Alexander

THE 24-YEAR-OLD BRITISH EXPLORER AND ENDURANCE ATHLETE RAN A MARATHON ON EVERY CONTINENT TO RAISE AWARENESS OF DEMENTIA



**Where does your passion for adventure come from?** I owe it to my grandfather, Captain Rick Taylor. He served in the British Army for 38 years, but it was his battle against dementia [an umbrella term associated with diseases that affect brain function, including Alzheimer's] that ended his life. He dreamed of taking on Mount Kilimanjaro, and after finishing school, I decided to go out there in his honour. I climbed for him and Alzheimer's Research UK, which is a charity I've supported ever since, but I also returned home with something for myself — a love for adventure.

**You ran seven marathons, one on each continent, to raise awareness of dementia — a challenge you completed in December 2023. Where did the project take you?** To many of the most remote corners of the world. I ran through the deserts of Morocco and Jordan, as well as a nature reserve in Alaska, the Australian Outback, the Amazon Rainforest, the Arctic Circle in Norway and Antarctica. There was a huge contrast in the wildlife, the communities, the weather — I started in Morocco's Agafay Desert, where temperatures are around 40C, and finished on Union Glacier, Antarctica, where it's -25C. It was the greatest 14 months of my life.

**How did you decide where to go?** Five of the seven runs were self-organised, so I picked destinations close to my family's heart. My mum is fascinated by destinations like Alaska and Australia's Outback; she may never visit but I did, and hopefully put a smile on her face.

I chose places that interested me, too. I'd dreamed of seeing the Amazon Rainforest for a long time, and Ecuador's Quechua community kindly invited me to visit. I often work with locals because no one knows the land better, and it's a huge privilege to be guided through someone's homeland. It took three months of negotiations to make the trip happen, and when I arrived, it turned out they'd never heard of a marathon; exercising for the sake of exercising isn't part of their culture.

**Why was meeting local communities important?** I wanted a global challenge to highlight a global cause. I wanted to show dementia is everywhere and impacts communities across the world and that's what my travels proved. I spoke to the Bedouins in the desert, the people of Alaska and the Outback, and everyone knew about it in some way. They didn't always know what the disease was, but they knew the symptoms.

**Is there one memory that stands out?** Antarctica was the most incredible and intimidating place I've ever experienced. The snow was so sharp at times that it was like sand; it was so painful that at one point during a blizzard, I looked down to check whether I was bleeding.

But when I think about this project, the wildlife is one of the first things that comes to mind. During the North American leg, I saw brown bears, wolves and moose, and I ran through the Alaskan Wildlife Conservation Center in the midst of these incredible animals.

**What happens next?** I published an open letter to the UK government addressing dementia diagnostics on 21 September 2023, World Alzheimer's Day, and carried it on the last three legs of my marathon challenge. Currently, one in three people in England with dementia never receive a formal diagnosis, which is simply not good enough. I'm calling on the government to invest £16m into improving this statistic and have received an invite from 10 Downing Street to discuss the letter. This is the pinnacle of the project: running seven continents will have meant nothing unless this letter is delivered and the issue is acknowledged.

**What's next for your travels?** For these first couple of years, my career has been all about momentum. But the goal now is to take another professional step: pioneering adventures that have never been done before. I'm still planning, but it may involve swimming. I've only done two major swims — the Alcatraz and the Dardanelles Strait from Europe to Asia — but swimming is something I really enjoy. It gives me a freedom I've never experienced with anything else.

**INTERVIEW: ANGELA LOCATELLI**

Louis Alexander is an explorer and endurance athlete.

📍 [louisalexander.org](https://louisalexander.org) 📷 [@louisalexanderexplorer](https://www.instagram.com/louisalexanderexplorer)

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## WHAT'S ONLINE

# ADVENTURES EVERYWHERE

National Geographic's annual Best of the World list reveals the top 20 experiences for 2024, from running the streets of Paris to skiing in the Caucasus Mountains

### 1 ULTIMATE SAFARI ON HORSEBACK

#### KENYA

A safari in Africa usually conjures images of mud-spattered 4WD moving through the bush. But there's a different, bolder way to safari — on horseback. Horse safaris originated in Kenya in the 1970s, and Borana Conservancy, a 32,000-acre conservation area in the north of the country, continues the tradition, with two stables housing horses for riders of all skill levels. Since wildlife don't perceive horses as a threat, this enables a more natural, intimate experience.

### 2 RUN LIKE OLYMPIANS

#### PARIS, FRANCE

For the first time, the general public will be able to run their own Olympic marathon, as part of the 2024 Summer Olympics in Paris. Held at night in between the official men's and women's races, and following the same 26.2-mile loop taking in Paris and Versailles, the Marathon for All sees places given to 20,024 entrants who must earn their spot by participating in certain sports or taking part in games and quizzes. An additional 20,024 places are allotted for a six-mile race.

### 3 SKI NEW PEAKS

#### GEORGIA

Long used as a means of transportation, exploration and hunting, skiing is a way of life in the mountainous, Eastern European nation of Georgia. Now, visitors can experience some of the country's best slopes — and its hospitable culture — through outfitters such as Georgia Ski Touring. Excursions may lead skiers through Gvibari Pass, in the country's remote Upper Svaneti region, or to UNESCO-listed villages like Ushguli, one of the highest in Europe.

## TOP STORIES

Here's what you've been enjoying on the website this month



### OVERTOURISM

#### Crowd-free alternatives

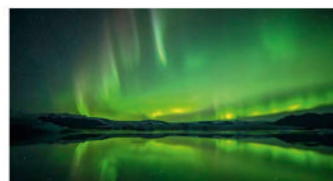
From Ljubljana to Raja Ampat, these places are as charming as their more popular counterparts.



### GREECE

#### Alexander the Great's kingdom

A UNESCO-recognised burial site and new museum shed fresh light on ancient Macedonia.



### PHOTOGRAPHY

#### Capturing the Northern Lights

This year is expected to bring some of the brightest displays in over a decade — here's how to snap them.



#### 4 JOIN THE BEARS

ALASKA, USA

Katmai National Park is home to the highest concentration of brown bears in the world. Far from the crowded viewing platforms of the Brooks Camp Visitor Center, a guided trip down the Katmai coast reveals a different side of the park. Along beaches and bays, the bears feast on a diversity of foods, from sedge grasses and berries to roots and razor clams. "For me, seeing a single brown bear in the wild is meaningful, because it's a sign that the landscape is healthy enough to support it," says Acacia Johnson, a National Geographic photographer from Alaska.

#### 5 HEAR IT LIVE

KYOTO, JAPAN

Guidebooks speak of Kyoto as frozen in time, with hushed temples and Zen gardens. But after hours, Japan's former imperial capital reveals a live music scene that can be loud and irreverent. At venues like Jittoku, Sarasa Nishijin and Field, rock, swing and even Irish music echoes into the night. Whether you're into jazz or punk, there's a community to share your jam. "This is what happens in Japan when the mask comes off," says Kyoto guide Van Milton.

#### 6 CRUISE AN EPIC RIVER

COLOMBIA

Eighty percent of the population of Colombia lives in the river basin of the Magdalena, which flows for nearly a thousand miles from the Andes to the Caribbean. AmaWaterways' new cruises along the river — the first offered by a major cruise operator — journey far upstream during seven-night trips, from the capital of Cartagena via Mompox town to Barranquilla city. Stops at 16th-century settlements, performances of vallenato and cumbia music, and visits to floating villages highlight the region's culture along this mighty waterway.

#### 7 ROAD TRIP WEST

ALBUQUERQUE, USA

For nearly a century, Route 66 has beckoned travellers west. A trip along the Mother Road through New Mexico hits timeless landmarks, such as quirky motels and curio shops near Tucumari and symbolic etchings in Petroglyph National Monument. And in Gallup — mentioned as one of the places to "get your kicks" in Nat King Cole's 1946 hit song Route 66 — you can see Indigenous performances featuring Zuni, Lakota Sioux and Navajo Diné dancers. Eighteen miles of the highway wind through Albuquerque, the longest urban interlude of the route in the US, and it's getting a glow up with ongoing lighted sign restoration. While cruising down the brightened strip, stop in at the newly opened West Central Route 66 Visitors Center, which hosts a Route 66 museum, lowrider car shows and artisan markets in the outdoor amphitheatre.

#### 8 EXPLORE ANCIENT ART

ALGERIA

Algeria is home to Africa's largest national park — and it has one of the world's greatest concentrations of ancient rock art. Tassili N'Ajjer National Park is a geological wonderland of sandstone pinnacles, arches and sculpted outcrops. But these rock forests (such as the one at Adrit, pictured left) are only half the story. Neolithic hunter-gatherers and herders carved 15,000 petroglyphs here, including images of elephants, giraffes and rhinos. These large mammals are more commonly associated with Sub-Saharan Africa — a hint that this arid wilderness was once a lush grassland crisscrossed by waterways. Five- to seven-day tours, led by Tuareg guides, view the most spectacular works of Tassili's art, including the Crying Cows, engraved at the base of a rock outcrop 7,000 years ago.

**READ THE FULL LIST ONLINE**

## BEYOND THE TRAVEL SECTION



### I ANIMALS I

#### This rare monkey species has found an oasis in the big city

Typically an 'urban avoider', the critically endangered red-shanked douc hides on the isolated 'Monkey Mountain' of Vietnam's Da Nang, a city of 1.2 million people.

[natgeo.com/animals](https://natgeo.com/animals)

### I HISTORY I

#### Here's what inspired this 16th-century map of sea monsters

At a time when the mortality rate for long maritime voyages was 50%, the Bible, legend and lore gave birth to a sea full of extraordinary creatures.

[natgeo.com/history](https://natgeo.com/history)

### I SCIENCE I

#### Is there a ninth planet out there?

Starting in 2025, the Vera C Rubin Observatory — currently under construction in Chile — will be hoping to spot new comets, asteroids and perhaps even our Solar System's Planet Nine.

[natgeo.com/science](https://natgeo.com/science)

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#### SWITZERLAND

##### The watchmaking peaks

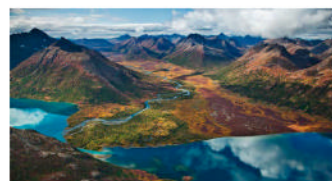
Get a rare insight into how this complicated craft is alive and ticking in the Jura Mountains.



#### UK

##### Dinner-table traditions

The highlight of a Sunday, the roast dinner is a celebration of British food. Here are some of the best.



#### ALASKA

##### How to visit like a local

Looking for easy boat tours and off-the-beaten-path trails? Residents share their top activities.

## SEARCH FOR NATGEOTRAVELUK





WEEKENDER

# MURCIA

From UNESCO-listed caves to marine reserves and quiet towns once inhabited by Romans, Carthaginians and Moors, this under-explored region of southeast Spain has surprises in store. Words: Rashmi Narayan

Wedged between the popular coastal destinations of Málaga and Alicante, the region of Murcia occupies a stretch of southern Spain too often neglected by international travellers. Sea coves and quiet beaches characterise its 155 miles of sunny coastline, beyond which lie hills, farmlands, dense forests and valleys perfect for hiking. Reliably balmy year-round temperatures make the province a good option for off-season travel — yet even at the height of summer, you're unlikely to see the crowds so often found in other Mediterranean regions.

Murcia has witnessed a varied history — the Romans, Carthaginians and Moors have all left a legacy, which is evident in the area's architecture, agriculture and festivities.

Gateway to this region is the city of the same name — Murcia, a provincial capital with regular flights from the UK that has the energy of a big city thanks to its university, yet remains intimate and walkable. Stroll past baroque cathedrals along cobblestoned streets, or indulge in a *tardeo* — the afternoon tradition of hanging out with friends, typically with tapas, beer and live music at terrace bars.







## TOP THREE Viewpoints

### SIERRA ESPUÑA

This enchanting woodland region, home to nearly 500 species of butterfly, was once a barren land, but has been reforested over the past century. Follow the trail leading up to Morrón de Alhama, surviving a few jaw-dropping steep climbs, to be rewarded with sweeping views of the countryside amid elm and pine trees.

### CASTILLO DE JUMILLA

Panoramic views of the vineyards in Jumilla, one of the region's top wine-producing towns, unfold the higher you climb on the trail leading up to this ancient castle. It's an ideal introduction to the wine-making landscape ahead of a day of cellar tastings in Murcia's Jumilla area.

### CABO DE PALOS LIGHTHOUSE

Take in some of the finest views of the Mediterranean Sea and Europe's largest saltwater lagoon at Mar Menor from this 167ft-high lighthouse, originally a lighthouse-keeper's school, on the esplanade in the pretty harbour town of Cabo de Palos.

## DAY ONE SAINTS & CITY STROLLING

### Morning

Wander through the narrow alleyways of Murcia's old town, towards the magnificent Catedral de Murcia, which has the second-tallest bell tower in Spain. Audio guides can be hired for a history lesson on the church's eclectic blend of baroque, Renaissance and gothic architecture. Exit through the 'Door of the Apostles', carved with angels and kings from the Old Testament, to reach Calle Trapería. A hub for fabric merchants and silversmiths in the 14th century, it's now peppered with boutique shops. From here, it's an easy walk to the city's 19th-century Romea Theatre. Legend has it that a friar cursed the building, as it stands on the site of a former convent. [catedralmurcia.org](http://catedralmurcia.org)

### Afternoon

The region is nicknamed the 'Garden of Europe' due to its fertile soil and extensive farmlands – the produce of which can be seen at Mercado de Verónicas. Browse the market's seasonal fruit and veg – peaches and melons in summer, artichokes in autumn – and local seafood such as jumbo Carabinero prawns, sea bream and sea bass. A number of small canteens in the market will cook or grill your chosen fish while you sip on a café cortado. After lunch, visit the Royal Casino – not a gambling den, but a former gentlemen's club. Built in 1847, it's designated a National Historical Building. The €5 (£4.30) entry fee allows you to admire its Moorish-style foyer, chandelier-hung ballroom and frescoes. [realcasinomurcia.com](http://realcasinomurcia.com)

### Evening

Before dusk, take a 15-minute drive south of the city up to the Sanctuary of La Fuensanta, a magnificent hillside church set amid orange and pomegranate trees, housing the patron saint of Murcia. It's a great spot to admire views of the city as the sky turns amber and pink, but don't miss the fine baroque details inside, including gold-plated Corinthian columns and frescoes depicting Murcian folklore. For dinner, head back to the city to grab an outdoor table in El Secreto in Plaza de Las Flores – a lively square dotted with flower stalls and restaurants, with a small central fountain. Order a beer and join the locals snacking on tapas such as *pulpo al horno* (baked octopus) while listening to accordion players who busk in the squares.

From left: Murcia's 15th-century cathedral; the Segura River runs through the historic centre of Murcia city





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## TOP FIVE

## Local specialities

**CALDERO**

The Murcian version of paella is a rich, flavourful pot of rice and fish traditionally served with garlicky alioli. *Caldero* means cauldron in Spanish and it was a fisherman's staple in the 19th century, ordinarily cooked by the sea over an open fire. The dish is typical to the Mar Menor region, using Calasparra rice, local peppers called *ñoras* and rock fish such as lubina or European sea bass.

**MARINERA MURCIANA**

A unique Spanish tapa originating from Murcia, combining chopped canned tuna with eggs and potatoes. The dish is served on a crusty savoury doughnut, with salty anchovies as an optional topping. In warm weather, pair this finger food with a local *tinto de verano* – red wine summer spritz.

**CAFÉ ASIÁTICO**

Made with Licor 43 vanilla liqueur, brandy, espresso and condensed milk, this Spanish spin on an espresso martini dates back to the early 20th century, when sailors who disembarked on the shores of Cartagena from the Philippines often ordered a version of the drink upon arrival.

**PASTEL DE CARNE**

This traditional, delicate, flaky Murcian meat pie is filled with spiced minced beef and pork mixed with boiled eggs. Try it at Espinosa bakery just south of the old town in the city of Murcia.

**MURCIA AL VINO**

A locally made goat's cheese, nicknamed 'drunken goat' – a nod to the fact that it's matured in red wine, giving it a distinctive purple rind. Remarkably smooth and creamy, it pairs very well with Murcian red wines.

## DAY TWO COBBLESTONE STREETS &amp; CANYONS

**Morning**

Drive west about 30 minutes to explore the pilgrimage town of Caravaca de la Cruz, home to the Caravaca Cross. This double crucifix, flanked by two angels, is believed to possess healing powers. The symbol appears all over town, from the city's coat of arms to signposts, but make sure you drop by the Basilica of Vera Cruz de Caravaca to see the original. A few metres away lies Calle Cuesta Castillo, a cobbled street famous for its annual Los Caballos del Vino horse race – a local tradition that can be traced to the time when the town was ruled by Moors. Learn more about it at the Museo Caballos del Vino, which displays the dazzling embroidered cloaks worn by the horses during the celebration. [museocaballosdelvino.com](http://museocaballosdelvino.com)

**Afternoon**

Make a lunch stop in the old town of Cehegin, a 10-minute drive east. Restaurant El Sol's rooftop offers views over the cascading whitewashed houses and is a good place to try local wines from Murcia's Jumilla region alongside *calamares rellenos* – stuffed squid. Spend the rest of the afternoon exploring further north, amid rice paddies in Calasparra – one of the prominent rice-growing regions of the country. The road leads to Almadenes Canyon, a deep gorge where you can hike or join a rafting adventure on the Segura River with Cañon y Cañon. The region is home to river otters, turtles and herons. Tours typically stop at the canyon's UNESCO-listed Monigotes Cave, scrawled with Neolithic rock art. [restaurantesol.es](http://restaurantesol.es) [cañonycañon.com](http://cañonycañon.com)

**Evening**

The area between Caravaca de la Cruz and Murcia city is home to such a high concentration of natural thermal springs that it has a 'spa route'. Heading east back towards Murcia, a good place to dip a toe is the town of Archena, where Romans discovered springs and built the first baths here around the second century BCE. The town's historic spa complex, the Balneario de Archena, feeds off the mineral spring with sulphurous waters erupting from Moorish fountains. After a soak, head back to Murcia for dinner at Salzillo. This traditional restaurant specialises in regional dishes such as *papajotes* – a Murcian dessert of batter-fried lemon leaves dusted with cinnamon. [balnearioidearchena.com](http://balnearioidearchena.com) [restaurantesalzillo.com](http://restaurantesalzillo.com)



Right: A hiker looks out over the landscape of the Almadenes Canyon





Left: Beach breaks in the Mazarrón region on Murcia's Costa Cálida

### Riding the rails

In May 2024, Murcia will get a second high-speed rail link with Madrid. The new services from train operator Ouigo will improve connectivity with Spain's capital city and extra competition on the route is likely to lower prices. Some of the new services will stop at Alicante en route.

## GO FURTHER ADVENTURES ALONG COSTA CÁLIDA


### Hormigas Islands

Protected since 1995, this marine reserve bordering the Cabo de Palos peninsula is considered one of the best diving destinations in Spain, if not Europe. The marine life includes octopus, moray eels, eagle rays and, occasionally, sunfish. Posidonia seagrass meadows, gardens of corals and underwater rock pinnacles make dives all the richer, and it's also common to see huge bait balls, which attract larger predators such as barracuda and tuna. Deep drop-offs can plummet to around 230ft and the waters also harbour shipwrecks such as *El Naranjito* — a cargo ship that sank in the 1940s. Trips can be booked with dive operators such as Adventure Divers, which also offers snorkelling, paddleboarding and jet skiing. [adventurediversspain.com](https://adventurediversspain.com)

### Town-hopping

In the far west of Costa Cálida, visit Águilas, where the area's rich neolithic history can be explored at the Águilas Archaeological Museum. Surrounded by unspoilt coves, the town is also an excellent jumping off point for dives around Cabo Cope. Estela Diving Tours offers day and night dives. About a 45-minute drive east is the harbour town of Cartagena, founded by the Carthaginians around 227 BCE. Take a guided walking tour to learn more about the town's naval history and modernist architecture, and explore the impressive Museo del Teatro Romano — a restored Roman amphitheatre from the period when Cartagena was a thriving Roman town, around the first century BCE. [escueladebuceo.com](https://escueladebuceo.com) [qualityguidedtours.com](https://qualityguidedtours.com)

### Beaches & boat charters

Playa de Levante, a vast expanse of white sand peppered with *chiringuitos* (beach bars), is one of Costa Cálida's finest beaches. Order a beer or *tinto de verano* at Bocana de Palos restaurant, with a portion of *caldero* (Murcian paella). Or follow the easy hiking trail west from the beach to Balcon de Cala Flores. At the fishermen's village of Cabo de Palos, another option is to hire a boat for a two-hour jaunt along the coastline. The boats come with a skipper and there are four routes to choose from. The pick is the one that takes in the Calblanque Regional Park, an area fringed with golden sands and rocky bays where you can stop for a swim and keep an eye out for dolphins. [bocanadepalos.myrestoo.net](https://bocanadepalos.myrestoo.net) [djinncharter.com](https://djinncharter.com) 

### MORE INFO

[turismodemurcia.es](https://turismodemurcia.es)

### HOW TO DO IT

EasyJet operates flights between Murcia and Gatwick up to five days a week. As of 2023, it also flies from Luton between April and October. It's necessary to drive if you want to explore beyond the city. EasyJet offers an option to hire a car with flight bookings, or there are local and international car-hire agency desks at Murcia airport. [easyjet.com](https://easyjet.com)



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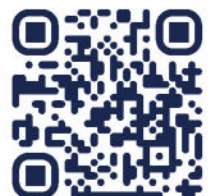
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# EAT BOGOTÁ

In the kitchens of the Colombian capital, a quiet revolution is creating a dining scene to rival that of Lima's, one where indigenous ingredients and local cultures are being championed to build unique flavour

WORDS: NICHOLAS GILL

Chef Mario Rosero is standing beside a wood-fired grill at the back of Prudencia, the restaurant he owns in La Candelaria, Bogotá's cobblestoned old town. The grill has three circular grates that can be adjusted to different positions. Small pieces of pork are sizzling on the one directly above the flames; a cast iron pot filled with corn is cooking less fiercely on another, higher up. Perfecting this clever, compact set-up is what Mario — a Culinary Institute of America graduate born in the Colombian city of Pasto and raised in Los Angeles — has been up to since the pandemic.

Rather than completely pivoting to takeaway, like so many restaurants, Mario and his staff started making and selling grills like these, plus home-made briquettes of binchotan, a slow-burning, smokeless charcoal. Since then, the restaurant menu has become a showcase for all of the goodies that come off the grills and smokers scattered around the multilevel premises, from house-made bacon to charred radicchio with butter-poached pear.

The restaurant, set in a former school building dating from the late 1800s, was remodelled by Colombian architect Simón Vélez with an iron-and-glass roof supported by repurposed fuel pipes. It doesn't really follow any prescription for how a restaurant is supposed look, and the place is only open for lunch service, for which the employees

are paid nearly double what most other restaurants in the area offer.

In many ways, it's the perfect symbol of Bogotá's culinary scene — a city whose restaurants are doing it their own way. As a regular visitor to Bogota for almost 20 years, I've found the city much changed: the dining scene has found its voice, matching the likes of Lima for gastronomic prowess.

"I left for a decade to travel and cook in Japan, the US and Spain, but the Bogotá I know and love drew me back," chef Jaime Torregrosa tells me later that evening at Humo Negro, the restaurant he opened in 2021. "It's grungy and a bit Gotham. And Humo Negro is our version of that."

A former sous chef at Bogotá's feted contemporary bistro El Chato, Jaime's first standalone venture is a Colombian take on an *izakaya*, an informal Japanese tavern serving drinks and snacks — although what I find seems to stretch that definition to its limits. Inside, it's dark — death-metal dark at times. The walls, booths and waiters' uniforms are all black, serving as a canvas for an occasional bold splash of colour — from graffiti and bathroom murals backlit by neon. Separating the kitchen from the dining rooms is a stack of wood to fuel the small grill, an area above which cuts of beef and fish are hanging to absorb the smoke. Despite the rock-club vibe,

Clockwise from top left: Stewed rabbit arepas at Mini-Mal restaurant; a street in La Candelaria district; Chawanmushi egg custard, served at Humo Negro restaurant; chef-owner Mario Rosero at Prudencia restaurant, which specialises in grill foods

IMAGES: ALEJANDRO OSSES; AWL IMAGES; GONZALO PICON; SHAURI DEWEY









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Bogotá is surrounded by Andean peaks  
Right: Crème brûlée with chontaduro, served at Mini-Mal

the food is bright and flavourful, like the belly meat of the Amazonian fish arapaima glazed with *tucupí* (fermented yuca extract), with citrusy camu camu berry on a thin *arepa* (a corn cake). Everything is in small portions and designed to share, and with a list of cocktails that are potent with mezcal and sake it all goes down with beguiling ease.

The following night, a little further north in Zona G, a food enclave within Bogotá's affluent Chapinero neighbourhood, I stop for a pre-dinner drink and snacks at Leo, one of the best fine-dining experiences in Colombia, as evidenced by its steady climb up The World's 50 Best Restaurants list. As a door opens, I can see into the austere dining room. But that will have to wait (I have a reservation for later in the week). Instead, I head upstairs.

When Leo's chef-owner Leonor Espinosa decided to relocate her restaurant during the pandemic, she didn't want the bar to be just a small area in the corner — it needed to be somewhere for her sommelier daughter Laura to flex her muscles, so she created an entirely new venue. Up two sets of stairs, with a wine cellar in between, La Sala de Laura is a totally different scene from the venue below. When I walk in there's a jazz singer belting out tunes and bar stools scattered at one end of the dining room. The tasting menu features many of the same 50-plus ingredients used

downstairs, but the big draw is the Territorio, the line of distillates Laura has created based on different Colombian ecosystems. I taste bosque andino ('Andean forest'), a spirit made from forest honey with bright floral flavours, and piedemonte (named after a Colombian region), distilled from cacao and coca leaves that give it citrusy, earthy notes. I try No. 7, a cocktail made from a spirit distilled from the fruit of the iguaraya cactus, mixed with a coffee-like liquid extracted from the roasted seeds of a leguminous plant called pülantana, along with a fig cordial. It's complex and strangely wonderful, proving that the slow-growing plants of tropical dry forests have just as much to offer in terms of flavour as those from lush rainforests.

Dinner downstairs at Leo proves to be just as much of a whistlestop tour of Colombian influences, with a menu based on the country's various ecosystems and inspired by its different peoples, including the Zenú, from the north, and the Wayuu, an Indigenous group from the Guajira Peninsula in the far north. There's spice-glazed duck with piplongo pepper, plus a dish that's a collection of different tubers, including yacón and malanga, which grow together in the high Andes. Not only is it all delicious, but it's also driving understanding of local ecosystems, putting Leo among elite Latin American

## A TASTE OF Bogotá



### MINI-MAL

Supporting artisan producers from around Colombia, this Chapinero Alto restaurant acts as a showroom for ingredients such as corn from Zenú producers in northern Montes de María, trout from fishermen on Laguna de la Cocha, in the west, and Amazonian *tucupí* (fermented yuca). Dishes from around COP35 (£7). [mini-mal.org](http://mini-mal.org)

### REY GUERRERO

Colombia's Pacific-coast cuisine, with its strong Afro-Colombian and Indigenous heritage, is rarely found inland. But for over a decade, chef Rey Guerrero has been championing it in the form of dishes like ceviche with *piangua* mussels, *arroz tumbacatre* (rice with shellfish) and the sweet-sour juice of the borojó fruit. Mains from US\$36 (£28). [reyguerrero.co](http://reyguerrero.co)

### AÇAÍ

Andrews Arrieta, the chef at this lunch-only spot, uses ingredients from the Amazon, including ants that taste like lemongrass, plump *mojojoy* (palm weevil larvae) and a rainbow of Amazonian fruits, with tiny chillies as garnishes. Try a whole tambaqui fish cooked in banana leaves, or grilled palm hearts. Mains around COP50 (£10). [instagram.com/acairestaurante](https://instagram.com/acairestaurante)

### PLAZA DE MERCADO LA PERSEVERANCIA

This food court showcases produce and cuisine from across Colombia, such as *caldo de costilla* (beef-rib soup), fried whole bocachico (a freshwater fish) and Boyacá-style tamales. Dishes from COP25 (£5). [instagram.com/la\\_perseveranciaplaza](https://instagram.com/la_perseveranciaplaza)



From left: Panela sugar is used to make the popular local drink agua de panela; the bar at Humo Negro, a Colombian take on an informal Japanese izakaya



## FIVE FOOD FINDS

1

### PANELA

Colombians each consume an average of 30kgs of this unrefined whole cane sugar a year — often infused with water and lime juice in the form of agua de panela.

2

### CURUBA

Also known as the banana passionfruit, curuba is a fragrant but tart fruit, typically consumed as a smoothie with milk and sugar, or infused in a mousse.

3

### EMPANADITAS DE PIPIÁN

These small, fried pastry parcels containing potatoes and ground peanuts get their reddish hue from peppery achiote seeds.

4

### COFFEE

Colombian producers Libertario Coffee Roasters, Azahar Coffee and Devoción Coffee use top-quality beans from the Eje Cafetero coffee-growing region, west of Bogotá.

5

### VICHE

Popular on the Pacific coast, this sugarcane spirit is fast becoming Colombia's answer to mezcal, with dozens of artisan brands emerging.



fine-dining restaurants such as Peru's Central, and Boragó, in Chile, which are also exploring uncharted territory for native ingredients.

When I visit El Chato, a four-minute walk away, I'm in more familiar territory. Other than a few extra tables upstairs near the kitchen, things are as I remember from previous visits. The menu, though, is markedly different. During the pandemic, chef-owner Álvaro Clavijo started a fermentation programme here. The intention was to develop new flavour profiles from native ingredients, but it has the beneficial side effect of cutting down on waste. He has also recently opened a French bistro called Selma nearby, a tribute to the years he spent cooking in France.

On shelves going up the stairs I peruse a collection of jars filled with cheese cultures and coconut and *tucupi* vinegars. Álvaro's dishes usually employ just three ingredients, so a drop of fermented oil here and vinegar there adds explosive flavours throughout the menu. A standout is a dessert that uses aubergine — roasted, to bring out its natural sweetness, then pickled — for a touch of acidity to an otherwise unassuming quenelle of vanilla ice cream.

After eating, I head with Álvaro to the Thursday-night Semper Mendoza market. "It's quite unique," he tells me as we enter a vast warehouse packed with an array of aromatic herbs and flowers. "I've never seen something

like it anywhere else. A market that focuses on herbs. We come once a month," he continues. "We buy a lot of things from here."

Álvaro points out thyme-like leaves from a small shrub called diosma. They've been harvested in Chingaza National Natural Park's páramo (a high-altitude, shrub-dominated zone), he tells me, and are commonly used to flavour cooking oil. Then there's ruda, a herb that helps with blood circulation and is added to teas to aid relaxation, although Álvaro uses it in cocktails or infuses it in aguardiente, regarded as Colombia's national spirit. In the kitchen, they're currently experimenting with the best way to add it to a dish with oysters and bone marrow.

As I traverse the city over the next few days, moving from meal to meal, I can't help but notice how distinct each dining experience has become in Bogotá. There are different influences drawn from disparate landscapes, and all venues have a unique vibe. And yet they're all saying the same thing about Colombian food and biodiversity: everything starts with the ingredient. ▣

**HOW TO DO IT:** Avianca flies between Heathrow and Bogotá direct. Flight time 11hrs. Other airlines fly via their European or US hubs. Stay at Casa Lélyte, a boutique hotel in Chapinero with four rooms and a vegetarian restaurant and bar. From £72 per night, B&B. [avianca.com](https://www.avianca.com) [casalelyte.com](https://www.casalelyte.com)



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SLEEP

# HONG KONG



Self-styled as 'Asia's world city', Hong Kong has seen its fair share of upheaval over the decades, but much of its current prosperity is built on its historic standing as a trading outpost. You sense that when you fly over the freighters that crisscross its waters, and see the skyscrapers that pierce its chockablock centre. A one-time British colony that sits in the South China Sea, it has always been a place where tastes and cultures collide. In this easily navigated destination, travellers typically stay in Kowloon, with its Victoria Harbour views, and on Hong Kong Island, which has exceptional places to eat and the landmark Victoria Peak.

WORDS: JOHN O'CEALLAIGH

ALL RATES QUOTED ARE FOR STANDARD DOUBLES, ROOM-ONLY, UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED.  
IMAGES: GETTY; THE LANDMARK MANDARIN ORIENTAL, HONG KONG



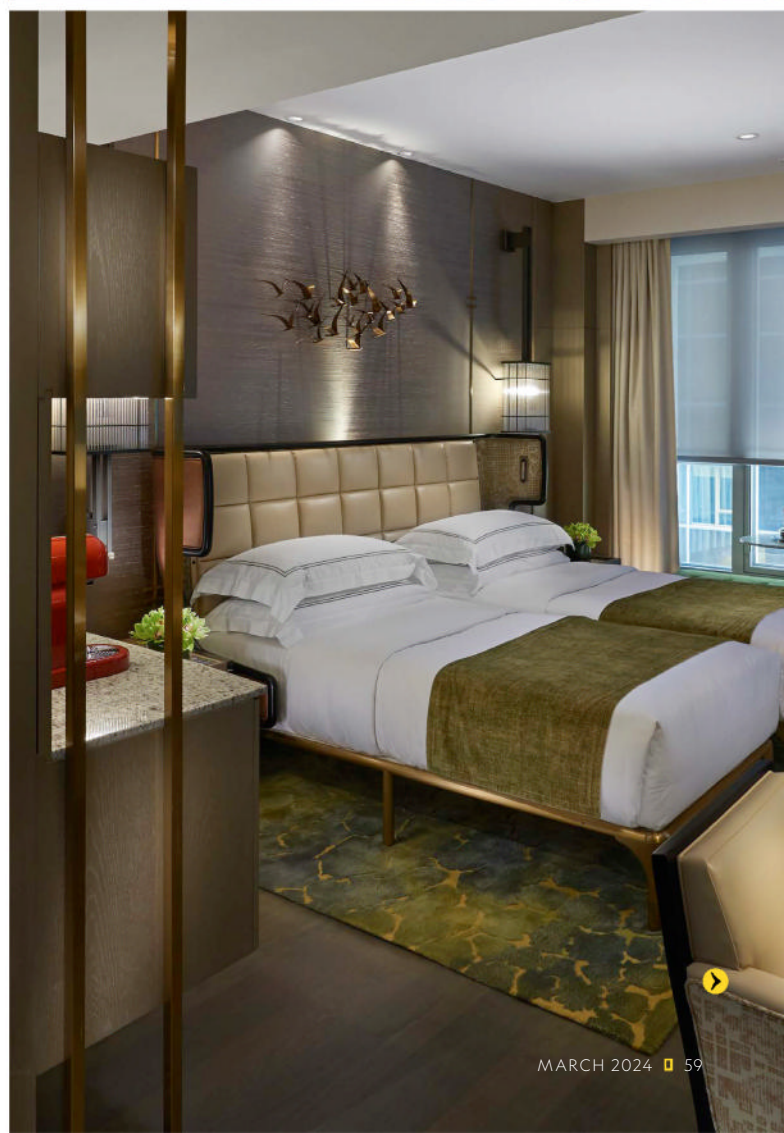


## Best for discreet decadence

### £££ THE LANDMARK MANDARIN ORIENTAL

There are two Mandarin Oriental hotels in Hong Kong: the original is the brand's global flagship, a six decades-long headline act in Central. In the same district, The Landmark distinguishes itself by taking a more demure approach. Cocktail connoisseurs gather at speakeasy-style bar PDT for creative cocktails (the name stands for 'Please Don't Tell') while diners ascend to the seventh-floor Amber restaurant for exceptional modern-French meals in an elegant room crowned by golden sculptural pieces. Other tasteful touches round off this thoroughly accomplished offering — spacious, sophisticated rooms in pistachio greens and earthy tones feature striking circular tubs alongside display cases stocked with complimentary treats; a quiet pool allows for proper swimming; and at the welcoming two-storey spa, experienced therapists deliver top-tier treatments.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$6,205 (£650), plus a 10% service charge. [mandarinoriental.com](https://www.mandarinoriental.com)







## Best for luxury for less

### £ THE LANGHAM, HONG KONG

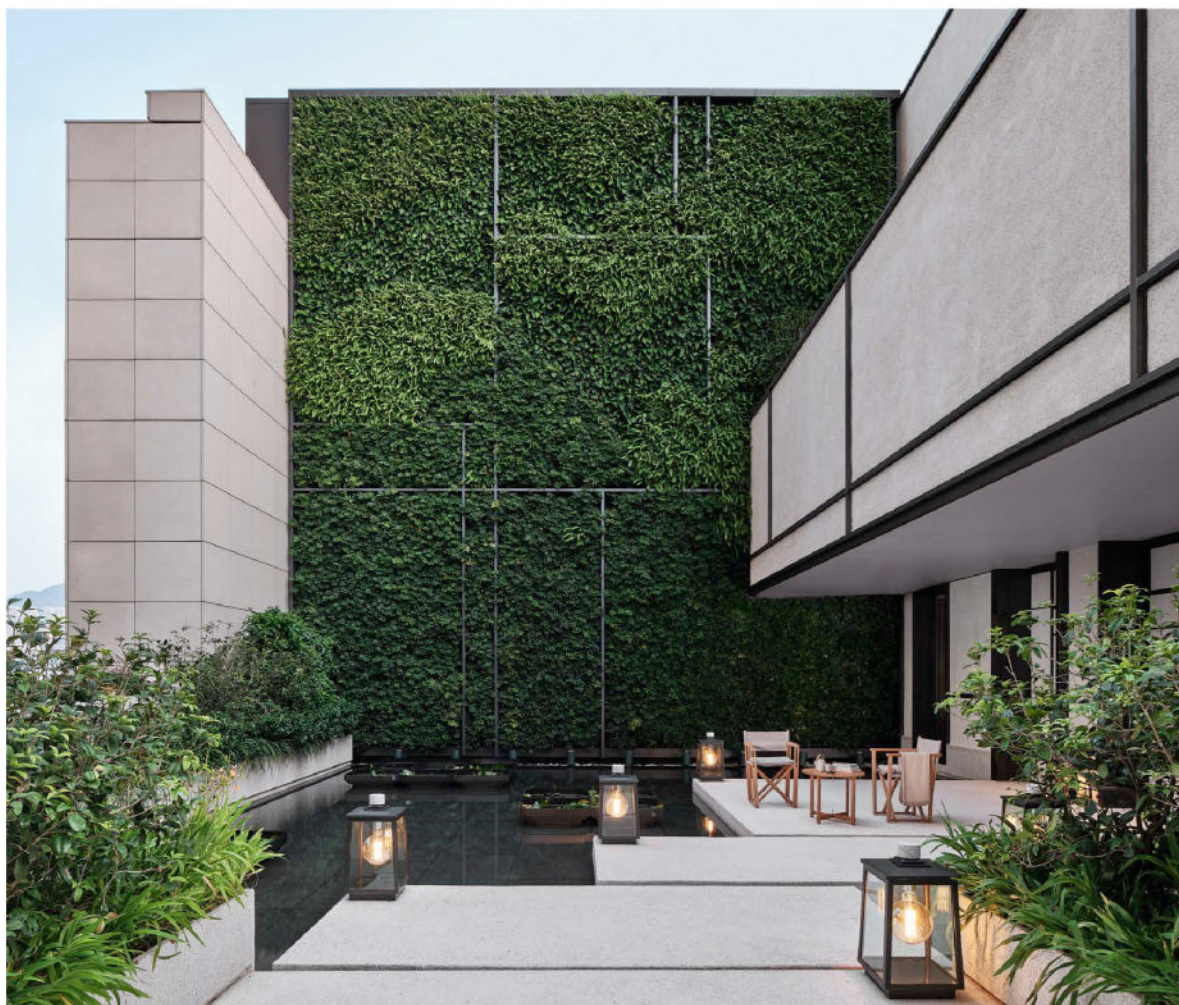
That you can bag such an impressive five-star hotel at this rate goes to show how Hong Kong can offer fantastic value for money. Unpretentious and inviting, the hotel's Palm Court lobby is a magnet for locals who gather for afternoon tea; beside it, the art deco-inspired Artesian bar buzzes as friends enjoy free-flowing drinks during 'extended happy hours' in the evening. And for out-of-towners, three-Michelin-starred T'ang Court provides an exceptional introduction to Cantonese cuisine, in a space decorated with Chinese art and priceless antiques. Another star amenity is the open-air rooftop pool that offers views towards the harbour, and for shoppers, there's an extra boon to the hotel's Kowloon setting: the property is surrounded by independent homeware and clothing stores, alongside fancy boutiques such as Tiffany.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$1,150 (£120).  
[langhamhotels.com](http://langhamhotels.com)



IMAGES: THE LANGHAM, HONG KONG;  
 OVOLO: ROSEWOOD HONG KONG





Clockwise from top left:  
The marble lobby at  
The Langham; Asaya's  
urban garden at  
Rosewood Hong Kong;  
a classy guest room at  
Ovolo Central

## Best for savvy socialites

### ££ OVOLO CENTRAL

Occupying a skinny skyscraper on Central's Arbuthnot Road, this welcoming property is minutes from Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong's entertainment district. It's also beside the more subdued delights of Tai Kwun, a century-old policing complex converted into a drinking, dining and cultural precinct. Though amiable service means the hotel remains relaxed, the Ovolo readily supports guests who want to get into the party spirit. Book direct and you're free to plunder the in-room mini-bar — with snacks, soft drinks and booze all included — plus there's a daily happy hour when drinks are again complimentary. Overdone it the night before? Rest up in the fuss-free, studio apartment-style bedrooms or replenish with nourishing Indian dishes at Veda, one of the few exclusively vegetarian restaurants you'll find in this meat-loving city.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$1,800 (£190), B&B. [ovolohotels.com](https://www.ovolohotels.com)

## Best for all-out extravagance

### £££ ROSEWOOD HONG KONG

As the scion of a local billionaire-class family, Rosewood Hotels' CEO Sonia Cheng was always going to go all out with the brand's flagship property in her home city. This Kowloon retreat shows what 'spare no expense' means in reality. Bedrooms feature walls woven with wool from upmarket Italian brand Loro Piana, cobalt-blue couches and lacquered cabinetry; bathrooms are clad in marble and finished with touches of copper. And there's plenty of soul on show, too — Cantonese restaurant The Legacy House pays tribute to the Cheng family with private rooms themed around the dynasty's key milestones. Attentive staff are accustomed to serving Hong Kong high society; amenities including bars, restaurants, spa and flash fitness facilities mean locals, as well as tourists, love the hotel.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$7,900 (£830), plus a 10% service charge, B&B. [rosewoodhotels.com](https://www.rosewoodhotels.com)



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## Best for cinematic sleepovers

£££ REGENT HONG KONG

This Kowloon hotel sweeps over the edge of Victoria Harbour, and its waterside rooms — they're the only option to go for — provide the perfect panorama of the metropolis. By day, traditional wooden junk boats, cargo ships and cruisers glide along the water; as dusk descends, flashes of light bring steel-and-glass towers to life as the daily 'Symphony of Lights' show animates the

skyline. Elegant rooms in beachy tones feature huge windows with banquette seating and soaking tubs. And there are other reasons to stay: afternoon tea and sundowners are served in the lobby, again with stellar views, and guests have access to a spa, pool and fitness facilities.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$6,000 (£630), plus a 10% service charge. [hongkong.regenthotels.com](http://hongkong.regenthotels.com)

## Best for suburban seaside living

££ THE ARCA

Just 20 minutes' taxi ride from Central, The Arca hits a sweet spot for travellers who want easy access to the city without its intensity. The Southern District setting is perfect for travellers keen to understand Hong Kong beyond its commercial core, with many parks, hiking trails and beaches nearby that are beloved by locals. At the property, there's a buzzy rooftop infinity pool and restaurant Arca Society, which serves Western and Asian specialities. Finished in pretty pinks and creams, mellow rooms come with slick mid-century-modern-style furnishings.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$1,600 (£168). [thearca.com](http://thearca.com)

## Best for escaping the city

£ HAKKA LIFE EXPERIENCE VILLAGE @ LAI CHI WO

In the Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark in the North East New Territories, this unique restored village includes 11 simple houses available for stays to guests who book an on-site activity. The settlement was established centuries ago by Hakka clans, an ethnic group originally from Northern China, and the project aims to celebrate them with workshops, such as weaving classes or rice harvesting. Designed to provide respite from city life, with no wi-fi or TVs, it's about as rustic as it's possible to be in Hong Kong.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$880 (£92). [lcwhakkalife.wixsite.com/hakkalifeprogram](http://lcwhakkalife.wixsite.com/hakkalifeprogram)

## Best on a budget

£ THE SALISBURY — YMCA OF HONG KONG

What's unexpected at this cheap-and-cheerful hotel is that guests enjoy one of the most coveted settings in the city, overlooking Victoria Harbour and Hong Kong Island's skyscrapers. It's also close to major attractions such as the Star Ferry and Hong Kong Cultural Centre. But there are other reasons to stay here — its leisure facilities are extensive; alongside two pools, there's a gym and challenging climbing wall. Finished in shades of milky coffee, rooms are perfunctory but comfy — book one facing the harbour for showstopper views of the city.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$1,200 (£125). [ymcahk.org.hk](http://ymcahk.org.hk)





The Vivienne Tam suite at Hotel Icon has views over Victoria Harbour  
Below: The striking neon sign at The Fleming in Wan Chai

## Best for feel-good hospitality

### ££ HOTEL ICON

Beloved by locals who visit for unfussy staycations, the Icon is owned by the Polytechnic University and many of its staff are students training for careers in hospitality. A 15-minute bus ride from Hong Kong's main attractions, the East Tsim Sha Tsui property's many facilities mean guests are happy to relax on site. Rooms feature generously sized bathtubs and complimentary mini-bars, plus there's a sixth-floor outdoor infinity pool, elegant Angsana Spa and an incredible swirling vertical garden with more than 8,600 plants in the building's atrium. For a special meal, snag a window seat at top-floor Chinese restaurant Above & Beyond for truly stunning views of the city.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$2,400 (£250), plus a 10% service charge. [hotel-icon.com](https://hotel-icon.com)

## Best for retro fans

### £ THE FLEMING

Illuminating an innocuous Wan Chai tower block on Hong Kong Island, the old-school neon 'The Fleming' sign running vertically down several floors of the building is the first sign that this is a hotel with retro sensibilities. Head inside you'll see that promise delivered handsomely with interiors inspired by Hong Kong's fabled Star Ferry. Look out for porthole-shaped mirrors and Star Ferry-style seating, all complemented by an aesthetic that emphasises classic materials like smoked-oak flooring and brass lighting. It's a charming take on the old-new character of the city, and the hotel provides easy access to another local institution: the brilliantly boisterous Cantonese restaurant Tung Po Kitchen is on the same street.

**ROOMS:** From HK\$1,400 (£145). [thefleming.com](https://thefleming.com)



IMAGES: HOTEL ICON; THE FLEMING HOTEL HONG KONG





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WORDS: BEN LERWILL & HEATHER RICHARDSON  
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## CAPE OF GOOD FOOD

**The most exciting food in South Africa's 'Mother City' reveals a long and fascinating history, and speaks to its rich diversity**

"I'd been making ice cream for the longest time and I'd never bothered to make flavours that would've made sense in an African context," says Tapiwa Guzha. "Once I realised that, I couldn't ignore it."

We're sitting in Tapiwa's cafe, Tapi Tapi, east of Cape Town's centre. On the wall, there's a cork board in the shape of Africa, with names of dishes, plants and smells pinned to their areas of association: post-harvest smoke, baobab and hibiscus around Zambia and the Democratic Republic of Congo; sage in the Western Cape of South Africa.

It's Saturday, and Tapiwa — dressed in blue overalls — hops up constantly to serve customers. "This ice cream has Cape Malay spices, so cinnamon, cardamom, aniseed, ginger," I hear him say. "This one is fonio — a grain from West Africa — and cinnamon, it's a bit crunchy." I opt for a nectarine and orange sorbet with spekboom — a South African succulent — and a chilli kick.

Tapiwa started experimenting with flavour while studying molecular biology at university. He realised he could make ice cream using leftover liquid nitrogen from the lab and adding whatever ingredients he had in the cupboard. "It started with playfulness, making substitutions to recipes I already knew," he says. "It wasn't an intentional thing. I just said, 'what's in the cupboard?'"

Using ice cream to showcase unusual pan-African flavours might be a new idea, but using available ingredients to alter traditional recipes isn't. In fact, it's how one of the region's most famous cuisines came into being. Cape Malay food is a city staple, but its roots lie several thousand miles away in Southeast Asia. The Dutch colonised South Africa in 1652 and for the next 200 years brought free and enslaved people primarily from what's now Indonesia. They cooked traditional dishes from their homelands, switching original ingredients for whatever was available, and often softening spices to suit European palates. The result was dishes that are still popular in Cape Town today, including fish curries, braised lamb stews and spiced, doughnut-like koeksisters.

To try the cuisine, I head to the Bo-Kaap neighbourhood, on the lower slopes of Signal Hill in the city centre. Many of

the first arrivals from Asia made the area their home, and it's now a heritage site, known for its brightly coloured houses. I pass some on Wale Street before climbing a flight of stairs to Chiappini Lane, where I arrive at Faeenza's Home Kitchen.

Faeenza Abrahams relaxes on the couch in her front room, praising the beauty of Cape Town: a city with Table Mountain in its midst, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and vineyard-carpeted mountain valleys. "Why would you live anywhere else?" she muses. Faeenza grew up in Bo-Kaap and learnt Cape Malay cooking from her mother. After decades selling sandwiches around the city, she launched her restaurant, as well as cooking classes teaching people about the role of spices in Cape Malay food. I get a demonstration, with a feast of cumin- and chilli-spiced chicken samosas and fluffy roti with a garlic and ginger chicken and potato filling.

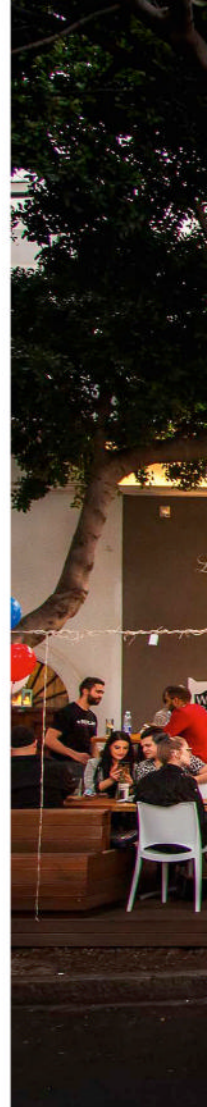
There's plenty of other Asian influence in the city's food. "Authentically South Africanly Indian" is how the owners of Vadivelu describe their restaurant in the central Gardens neighbourhood. The menu presents a modern take on recipes passed down from co-owner Jason Moodley's ancestors, who arrived in the east-coast city of Durban in the 1800s as indentured labourers from British-colonised India. Most Indians arrived in Durban to work in the sugarcane fields; today, the city has the largest population of people of Indian descent outside India, and its own style of Indian food, which is wildly popular across South Africa. Vadivelu uses recipes from India and the Indian diaspora as a foundation but is keen to avoid strict definitions — and the word 'fusion'.

"We have access to ingredients from all over the world. As a result, all food tends to be fusion," explains co-owner Tim Wyatt-Gunning when I visit one Thursday evening. It's fully booked, its back wall covered by a jungle scene, with tigers emerging from the foliage. I start with pani puri, a puffy deep-fried sphere filled with potato, chickpea and tamarind water. Next is chicken Durban curry, a slightly milder version of traditional Durban curries, which are typically made with mutton. The tikka masala is adapted from the classic Indo-British version: pan-cooked, rather than made in a tandoor, and full of flavour, thanks to its Durban spice blends.

It's a menu that reveals how Indian cuisine travelled across the world, arrived in Cape Town and emerged as something new, drawing on a blend of influences that meet in the city. Like Tapiwa's pan-African ice cream and Faeenza's Cape Malay home cooking, it's food that tells a complex story. **HR**

**HOW TO DO IT:** Cape Fusion Tours has a private Cape Town Eats City Walking Tour from ZAR 3,000 (£126) per person. [capefusiontours.com](https://capefusiontours.com). Doubles at Radisson RED V&A Waterfront, Cape Town from £112, room only. [radissonhotels.com](https://radissonhotels.com)

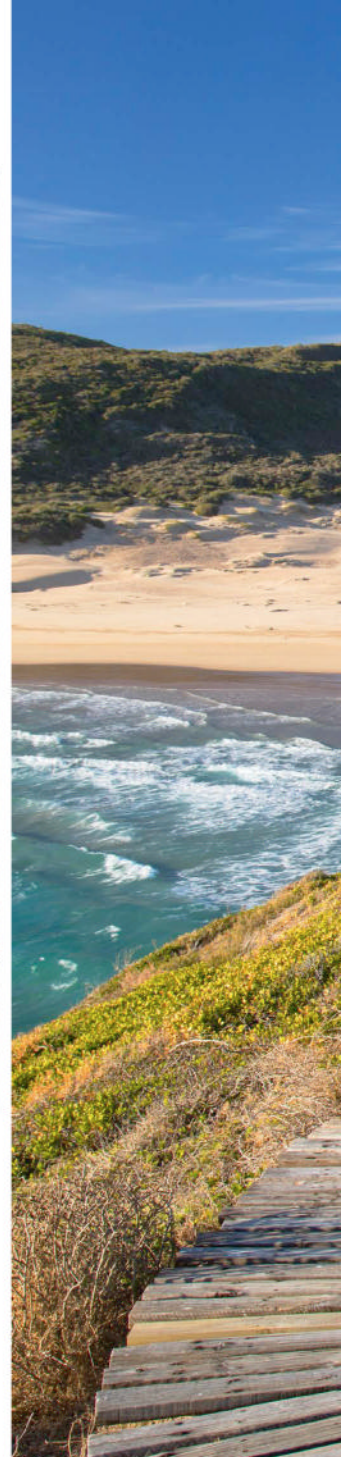
Clockwise from top: Restaurant-lined Bree Street in central Cape Town; Faeenza Abrahams outside her restaurant in the Bo-Kaap neighbourhood; Vadivelu's 'pop cones', with paneer, cabbage and onions in popadums. Previous pages, clockwise from top left: Cooking class at Faeenza's Home Kitchen; hanging bridge at Tsitsikamma National Park; Namaqua National Park in bloom; Bertrand Café in Maboneng, Johannesburg











## SIX DAYS ON THE GARDEN ROUTE

One of the world's great coastal drives, the Garden Route offers food, adventure, culture and beach time in equal measure

The setting for arguably South Africa's most scenic road trip, the Garden Route runs for 125 miles along the country's southern coast, from Mossel Bay (about 240 miles east of Cape Town) east to Storms River. The ocean-hugging N2 road — as it's more prosaically known — cuts between sandy beaches, pretty towns and dense patches of indigenous forest, with the Outeniqua Mountains a short distance inland. A road trip along it allows for experiences that range from adrenaline-pumping bungee jumps to leisurely wine tastings, and a plate of oysters at a waterside restaurant rounding off the perfect day.

### DAY ONE

Mossel Bay is something of an adventure hub, home to a zip-line that extends over the ocean — at 3,773ft, the longest of its kind in

the world — and the chance to sandboard down the 1,148ft-long Dragon Dune, South Africa's largest. It's not all adrenaline-drenched escapades though. There's evidence of Middle Stone Age human inhabitation at the Point of Human Origins archaeological site, including tools dating back 160,000 years. From here, you can take a detour inland to the Outeniqua Mountains, which run along the southern coast, with options for day hikes. [mosselbayzipline.co.za](https://mosselbayzipline.co.za) [dragondune.com](https://dragondune.com) [humanorigin.co.za](https://humanorigin.co.za) [sanparks.org](https://sanparks.org)

### DAY TWO

It's a 50-minute drive to the tiny town of Wilderness. The beach here is a long sweep of platinum-blond sand backed by frothing waves in which dolphins play. The Wilderness section of the Garden Route National Park

is a protected area of indigenous forests and coastal rivers and lakes. At the Wilderness Ebb-and-Flow Rest Camp, guests can rent a canoe to paddle down the Touws River, looking out for fish eagles and the half-collared kingfisher. There's also a walking trail dedicated to the latter and one to an Outeniqua yellowwood tree thought to be over 800 years old. [sanparks.org](https://sanparks.org)

### DAY THREE

The lagoon-side town of Knysna, 40 minutes from Wilderness, is a popular holiday destination for South Africans and visitors from further afield. Whale-watching season, when southern right and humpback whales can be seen along the coast, runs from June to November. Another major draw is food, mainly seafood — oysters being a speciality. The





From left: Bungee jumping from Bloukrans Bridge; hiking in the Robberg Nature Reserve, Plettenberg Bay; locally sourced oysters, served with lemon at 34 South in Knysna

waterfront restaurant, wine shop and deli, 34 South, serves both wild and cultivated oysters in a host of ways, from ceviche to panko fried. Other ocean-view restaurants worth trying are Tapas & Oysters, for seafood and tapas-style dishes, and O Pescador, for South African-Portuguese cuisine, including grilled sardines. [34south.biz](http://34south.biz) [tapasknysna.co.za](http://tapasknysna.co.za) [opescador.co.za](http://opescador.co.za)

#### DAY FOUR

Half an hour from Knysna is Plettenberg Bay, another well-established holiday town. There's great accommodation here, including The Plettenberg, a boutique hotel with ocean-facing pools and direct beach access. Outside town, there's the chance to sample cool-climate Sauvignon Blancs and sparkling Méthode Cap Classique (traditionally made

South African sparkling wines) at producers such as Bramon Wine Estate or Newstead Wine Estate. There are less leisurely pursuits, too, like canyoning. It's also possible to spot great white sharks in the shallow coastal waters off Robberg Nature Reserve. [theplettenberghotel.com](http://theplettenberghotel.com) [bramonwines.co.za](http://bramonwines.co.za) [newsteadwines.com](http://newsteadwines.com) [africanyon.com](http://africanyon.com) [capenature.co.za](http://capenature.co.za)

#### DAY FIVE

From the village of Nature's Valley, 30 minutes away, it's possible to sample a section of the 39-mile Tsitsikamma Trail on an overnight hike. The 11-mile chunk leads through indigenous afromontane forest and native fynbos vegetation. Adventure sports company MTO Trails offers a 'slackpacking' service that drops food and luggage at a basic overnight hut on the route, meaning you need only carry a daypack,

and can arrange for a shuttle back to your car the next morning. There are also day hikes from Nature's Valley, including the four-mile Groot River Trail, which follows the river to a beach before looping back. Maps and permits are available at Nature's Valley Rest Camp. [sanparks.org](http://sanparks.org) [tsitsikamma.info](http://tsitsikamma.info) [mtotrails.com](http://mtotrails.com)

#### DAY SIX

Between Nature's Valley and Storms River is the 709ft bungee jump — one of the world's highest — from Bloukrans Bridge. It starts with a zip-line to the jump point. For a softer thrill, the SkyWalk affords river gorge views from the bridge's suspended walkway. Storms River is the official end of the Garden Route — travellers craving one final adventure can explore the town's gorge by kayak. [bloukransbungee.com](http://bloukransbungee.com) [untouchedadventures.com](http://untouchedadventures.com) **HR**



## NATURAL WONDERS

The varied landscapes of South Africa play host to an extraordinary variety of seasonal natural phenomena

### THE SARDINE RUN

You don't need wildebeest for a great migration. The annual movement of billions of sardines up the country's east coast, South Africa's sardine run is among the planet's most impressive natural events. Swimming north towards the warmer waters off KwaZulu-Natal, the huge school of fish draws predators in numbers. Pods of dolphins twist hungrily among the sardines, grabbing what they can; squadrons of Cape gannets dive-bomb into the action from the skies; sharks and whales swim open-jawed through the shoals. The migration usually takes place between early June and late July, and numerous operators can take you out on the water for a chance to witness the spectacle first-hand. [offshoreportstjohns.com](http://offshoreportstjohns.com) [prodivesardinerun.co.za](http://prodivesardinerun.co.za)

### TURTLES AT SODWANA BAY

It's a cycle that dates back to prehistory. Between November and January each year, female loggerhead and leatherback turtles emerge from the Indian Ocean to heave themselves up the beaches of Sodwana Bay and deposit their eggs in the sand. Around 60 days later, tiny hatchlings crawl out into the night air, flip-flapping their way down to the shore.

Sodwana Bay stretches along the northern part of the KwaZulu-Natal coast, backed by dunes and dense forest. It's primarily renowned as a scuba-diving site, but the chance to see its nesting sea turtles is as good a reason to come calling. Tours to see them in the sand are on foot, usually beginning at sunset, and can last from two to four hours. [kosi.co.za](http://kosi.co.za)

### DESERT BLOOM IN NAMAQUALAND

Think of a desert, and what do you see? Probably not a saffron-coloured spread of flower-carpeted shrublands, but that's exactly what appears each year in the arid surrounds of Namaqualand in the Northern Cape.

The star of the show is a vibrant orange wildflower known as the Namaqualand daisy, which blankets the remote Namaqua National Park. Smaller blooms of purple, yellow, pink and blue wildflowers add to the floral extravaganza, which in turn draws butterflies, bees and other pollinators in droves. The key period for seeing the flowers is between early August and late September, during the Southern Hemisphere spring. Demand for local accommodation is generally high, so book well ahead. [experienzenortherncape.com](http://experienzenortherncape.com)

### NIGHT SKY IN THE KALAHARI

Since 2019, the !Ae!Hai Kalahari Heritage Park has been designated as an International Dark Sky Sanctuary, the only one of its kind in Africa. Sitting close to the borders of both Namibia and Botswana, and benefiting from precious little light pollution, it offers world-class stargazing. This is especially true in the dry season, between May and October, when the skies are at their clearest and the constellations at their brightest.

The park covers some 193sq miles, which brings a wonderful sense of isolation, and the community-run !Xaus Lodge makes for a memorable place to stay. If you time your visit to coincide with a new moon, when the star-speckled dark skies are at their most vivid, then so much the better. [xauslodge.co.za](http://xauslodge.co.za)

### WHALES IN HERMANUS

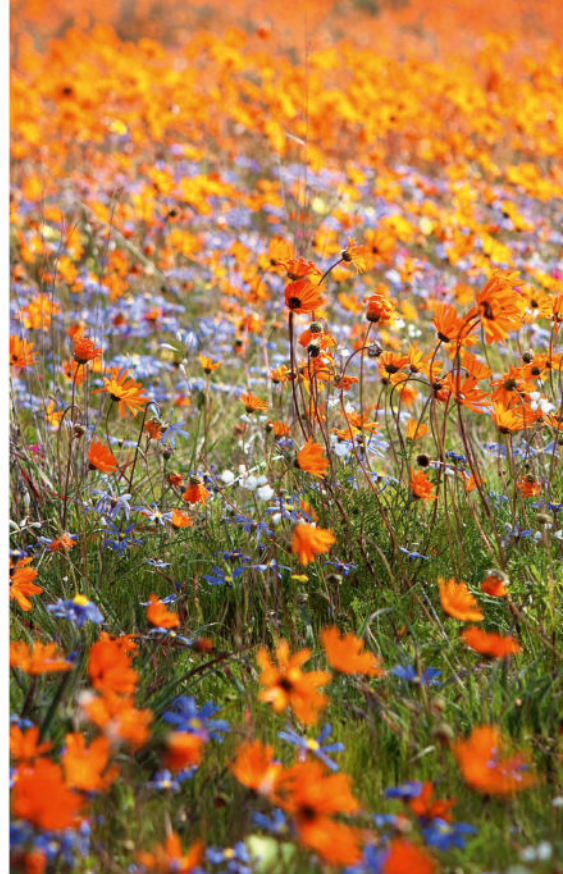
When it comes to land-based whale-watching, few places worldwide can rival Hermanus. The coastal town sits on a headland in the Western Cape, where its low cliffs grant prime views across Walker Bay and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. It's scenic at any time, but in the latter half of each year, particularly between August and October, the area is frequented by huge, 50-ton southern right whales.

The Hermanus Whale Festival takes place in late September, a sociable event with street parades and more. If whale sightings are the priority, though, coming at a quieter time can reap rewards, with fewer crowds. The town is close enough to Cape Town to work as a day trip, although wineries and walking trails give good reasons to linger. [hermanus-tourism.co.za](http://hermanus-tourism.co.za)

### WATERFALLS IN FULL FLOW

South Africa has some seriously impressive waterfalls. The towering 3,225ft Tugela Falls in the Drakensberg mountains are the highest, but there are beautiful cascades elsewhere. You'll find a number of them in and around Blyde River Canyon, a deep, verdant gorge stretching for over 15 miles.

At 300ft, the Lisbon Falls are a highlight. The canyon sits in the small, mountainous province of Mpumalanga, which draws most of its rainfall between November and January. Visit near the start of the year to see the falls in full flow. Following the 99-mile-long Panorama Route, a classic road trip that traverses the province from north to south, you'll encounter them along the way. [mpumalanga.com](http://mpumalanga.com) **BL**







Clockwise from top left: Desert bloom in Namaqualand; the 15-mile-long Blyde River Canyon, Mpumalanga; a southern right whale near Hermanus







## NEW WINE ADVENTURES IN THE SWARTLAND

**The little-known Swartland region is making waves on the South African wine scene and offers a uniquely welcoming experience to visitors**

As she drives along the dirt road to Swerwer Wines — passing whitewashed farmhouses amid rows of grape vines, silvery mist hanging in the foothills of the mountains beyond — Prisca Llagostera talks about the community that makes the Swartland wine region in the Western Cape so special. “Everybody here is best friends, even though they’re competitors,” she says. “It’s something that made me fall in love with the area.”

The southern edge of the Swartland, an area of wheat fields, olive groves and vineyards,

is about an hour north of Cape Town. It makes excellent wines, particularly Chenin Blancs and red Rhône varietals, and it’s far less visited than places such as Stellenbosch, South Africa’s most famous wine region. Stellenbosch has more than 150 wineries and some of its vines were planted in the 1690s; most of the Swartland’s 30-or-so wineries were established in the past two decades.

Prisca is on a mission to shine a light on the relatively young industry. In 2023, she opened a hotel in the little town of Riebeeck Kasteel. Kokos Huis is a renovated farmhouse with six bedrooms and three cottages decked out in a simple style and surrounded by palm trees and fever trees full of weaver birds. One of the perks of staying here is access to the local wine scene. Through her husband, Jurgen Gouws, the maker behind Intellego Wines, Prisca is well connected. The region isn’t like Stellenbosch where long-established wineries are clearly signposted and have fancy tasting rooms — here, knowing an insider helps.

En route to Swerwer Wines, about half an hour from Kokos Huis, Prisca points out turn-offs to other wineries. There’s AA Badenhorst — one of the four wineries that kicked off the

From left: Jasper Wickens in his cellar at Swerwer Wines; the palm-tree-framed pool at Kokos Huis; rolling hills in the Swartland, with the Groot Winterhoek mountains in the distance

IMAGES: TEAGAN CUNIFFE





Swartland's wine scene in the early 2000s. And there's MC Stander's L'Equinox wines, identifiable by their fun illustrated labels: a llama at the beach for the Low Drama rosé, or an astronaut flicking a 'rock on' hand gesture for the light, red Find Your Happy Place.

Prisca explains that the winemakers round here share cellars, help each other with grape harvests, sell each other's wines at trade shows — and generally don't behave like competitors. "I don't know where else you see that," she says. "They've really got each other's backs."

A tour with Prisca — during which guests might visit two to four winemakers depending on their time — is more like visiting friends. Swerwer Wines, owned by Jasper Wickens, is a case in point. At his winemaking cellar — a barn full of tanks and stacked barrels — Jasper grabs some glasses, a bottle of sparkling wine and a packet of springbok *droëwors* (dried sausage) and leads Prisca and her guests up to a dam with a view of the valley.

Sipping a glass of bubbles in the sunshine, he talks about the Swartland wine scene — to get a real sense of how tight the community is, he says, visitors should join the regular Thursday pizza nights at AA Badenhorst's

Kalmoesfontein Farm, at which local winemakers and farmers gather. "In the middle of harvest, there are 150 to 200 people there. It's really pumping," he enthuses.

A similar experience can be had at the summer '5am wine braais' at one of the Swartland's farms. Winemakers get together to toast the sunrise, compare notes on each other's wines and grill some *wors* (sausages), and then head to work. A bonus if you're here on your travels is that you get to enjoy all that and then slide back into bed afterwards.

Leaving Jasper, Prisca drives her guests to her husband Jurgen's Intellego wine cellar, located next to the 200-year-old farmhouse that the couple rent. After introducing his wines and taking samples from some of the barrels, Jurgen cracks open a bottle of Intellego 'Hey Mila!' Mourvèdre Pét-Nat — a light red wine with an aroma of plums — and everyone sits on the sun-splashed steps outside. "People overuse the word community," he says. "But the Swartland," he promises, "is a real community." **HR**

**HOW TO DO IT:** Kokos Huis has rooms from 1,995 ZAR (£84) and visits to local wineries. [kokoshuis.com](http://kokoshuis.com)

## Other South African wine regions

### STELLENBOSCH

South Africa's most famous wine region is based around the historic town of the same name. It has more than 150 wineries surrounded by rippling mountain ranges, with Cabernet Sauvignon the most planted grape variety. It's only 40 minutes from Cape Town, so easy to do in a day with a designated driver or guide. [wineroute.co.za](http://wineroute.co.za)

### FRANSCHHOEK

The neighbouring wine valley to Stellenbosch is equally popular. It's smaller, with about 45 wineries open to visitation, and known for Cap Classique sparkling wine. The hop-on, hop-off Wine Tram trundles between wineries on five lines, each with seven or eight stops. The little town itself is a great place to eat, home to some of the country's best fine-dining restaurants. [winetram.co.za](http://winetram.co.za)

### CONSTANTIA

This wine valley is home to 10 farms and is the oldest in the country, producing wine since 1685. It's particularly recognised for its Sauvignon Blancs. Only 20 minutes south of Cape Town city centre, it's easy to reach by taxi, meaning everyone can partake in a glass or two with views of the vines and Table Mountain beyond. [constantiawineroute.com](http://constantiawineroute.com)

### HEMEL-EN-AARDE

Meaning 'heaven and earth' in Afrikaans, this wine valley is near the whale-watching town of Hermanus, about 90 minutes south from Cape Town. There are 15 wineries scattered on either side of the Hemel-en-Aarde Road, known for cool-climate wines like Pinot Noir. [hemelenaardewines.com](http://hemelenaardewines.com)











## UNFORGETTABLE TRAILS

Stretching across KwaZulu-Natal province in the south of the country, the Drakensberg mountains offer world-class hiking surrounded by stunning scenery

It's 6am in the morning. I'm crammed into the back of a Toyota, rattling up a truly terrible unsealed road in blanket mist, about to begin one of the greatest walks of my life. The next few hours will also serve up mud, two chain ladders and, at times, a view that extends no further than the end of my arm. But in the Drakensberg mountains, special things lie in wait.

I've come on a hiking trip to the largest mountain range in South Africa, which can be found around four hours south of Johannesburg. It's a grassy massif full of grand, muscular contours, almost 940sq miles of which are designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ancient rock art decorates its caves, baboons caper in its valleys and footpaths thread over its buttresses.

On the afternoon I arrive here from the city, it feels something like deliverance. The foothills are a soft green, their slopes sketched with bracken. A herd of hartebeest appears at the roadside. Sunlight washes down onto villages of thatched *rondavels* (traditional round huts) and roaming hens. I drive past a 'chameleon crossing' sign, then weaver bird nests dangling from an acacia tree. The peaks on the horizon are tall and table-topped.

When I reach the Cavern Resort & Spa, a hill sanctuary where red-winged starlings swoop past tree ferns and the world's best-exercised spaniels snooze in reception, Mike Mlangeni talks me through the following day's trail. Mike is a hiking guide, a proud Zulu, a Liverpool fan and an early riser. "We leave at 4am," he tells me. "When we get there, we'll have to take a four-wheel drive transfer to the start. Bad road," he says, fixing eye contact. "But worth it."

This is how we come to be juddering up a track before breakfast, watching the dawn fog become thicker. We're about to begin the Amphitheatre hike, a 7.5-mile circuit that culminates on an outlandishly beautiful escarpment. Or so I'm told. The first hour, in near-zero visibility, is slow going, and it's not until a semi-view opens up, with rags of cloud settled in the clefts of a mighty mountainscape, that I feel my blood pumping. Then we reach the chain ladders.

"They're simple," says Mike, as we stand under a set of iron rungs disappearing up the rock face. "Just don't look down." Minutes later, we've negotiated both nerve-racking ladders — around 78ft and 50ft respectively, although there's a longer alternative route for those disinclined to climb them — and reached a grassy plateau. A malachite sunbird whizzes past, a blast of colour in the lingering mist. It's at this point, after some 90 minutes of walking, that the sun breaks through and the scenery hurtles dizzily into focus.

We've reached an altitude of over 2,438m. A river is chuckling away from us across the plateau and, as we keep walking, I see that it's flowing directly off the cliffside. My pulse quickens. A sign bolted to a rock reads 'Tugela Falls — The Tallest Waterfall In The World — 983 metres (3,225ft)'. Seconds later, the view from the drop-off opens up and hits me physically: a dreamlike universe of plunging water, basalt precipices and miles-away mountains.

I walk south, dazed, rambling along the cliff edge and staring out, then turn and do the same heading north. There are butterflies at my feet and gorges in the distance. Somewhere far below, cloud-shadows are patching the valley floor. I can't take it all in. "See," says Mike smiling when I rejoin him. "Worth it."

Two days later, I'm sitting under a sandstone overhang examining 1,000-year-old paintings of hunters and lions. I've driven further south in the range to reach the thunderously handsome area around Cathedral Peak Hotel, a resort here since 1939. I had thought, foolishly, that the Amphitheatre's scenery wouldn't be topped, but here the peaks are more clustered, more hewn, somehow even more thrilling in scale. Groves of flowering protea trees dot the hills and black cuckoos echo from slope to slope.





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The human figures in the rock paintings, which are thought to have been created using antelope blood, are shown running with spears. “They were done by the San people,” says my guide Zweli Sithole, his sun hat floppy above his scarified cheeks. “They were here before us Zulus, but they’re long gone now.” Zweli is the perfect hiking companion, with a warm patience and a habit of singing his words. “One step at a time,” he chants softly as we make the steep ascent up to a natural arch known as Mushroom Rock. “One step at a time.”

He leads me on a 10.5-mile loop through the empty green hills. Before I set out, the route description had sounded routine, but the reality is anything but. Craggy pinnacles frame the sky while slopes and ridges ripple into the distance. On a far hillside, elands graze in the sunshine. The views seem colossal and in all directions at once: spin on your heel and every way’s a winner. Zweli points out a high mountain pass that leads into Lesotho, then crouches by a stream to show me a crunched pile of crab shell left by an otter. We finish with a swim in the natural pool beneath Doreen Falls.

We stop so often to just sit and stare that it takes us nearly seven hours to get ourselves back to the resort. My boots are dusty and my calves are sore, but I’m absolutely buzzing for the rest of the day. Drakensberg translates as ‘dragon mountains’, while the Zulu word for the range — uKhahlamba — means ‘barrier of spears’. Never, I’m left thinking, were such dramatic names more warranted. **BL**

**HOW TO DO IT:** Rooms at the Cavern Resort & Spa from 1,900 ZAR (£80) per person, including meals and guided hikes. [cavern.co.za](http://cavern.co.za) Cathedral Peak Hotel has rooms from 1,995 ZAR (£84) per person, including meals. [cathedralpeak.co.za](http://cathedralpeak.co.za) For regional info, see [zulu.org.za](http://zulu.org.za)

From left: Some of the rock art in the Cathedral Peak area is thought to be 1,000 years old; a packed lunch with views over the Tugela River

## Three other great Drakensberg hikes

### FOR SCENERY Tugela Gorge

This 8.7-mile walk leads to the foot of Tugela Falls and back from the head of the gorge, with cliff scenery and some scrambling.

### FOR A CHALLENGE Cathedral Peak

This is an epic all-day, 12-mile hike from Cathedral Peak Hotel to its namesake summit, with narrow ledges and steep rock faces.

### FOR A SHORTER HIKE Lone Rock

Head into the hills from the Cavern Resort & Spa to enjoy rock art, as well as deep views of green valleys and surrounding peaks, on a 2.5-mile round trip.

*Further route information and guides can be arranged via the Cavern Resort & Spa and Cathedral Peak Resort.*





A ceramicist at work in Victoria Yards. Clockwise from top left: Yarn shop Urban Flock, and vegetable plots at Victoria Yards; artist Splash Motong in the Living Arts Emporium







## CITY OF CREATIVITY

**Artisans and craftspeople are busy breathing new life into Johannesburg's cultural landscape**

For much of the 20th century, Johannesburg's Victoria Yards was a steam laundry, used to wash hospital sheets. By the 1990s the laundry was gone, its courtyards and red-brick buildings a grim zone of dumped paint, panel beaters and chained dogs. Then, in 2016, a far-sighted developer passed the yards and saw potential for regeneration. Today, koi carp swim in its channels, murals brighten its walls and peach trees grow in its gardens.

Beyond the complex, Johannesburg vibrates with heat and traffic. This is a metropolis of six million people and Victoria Yards is a kind of sanctuary within it. It grows fruit and veg and runs learning centres to aid disadvantaged kids but, above all, it's a hub for artisans. More than 40 occupy its 7.5-acre site, from glassblowers and screen printers to coffee roasters and ceramicists. One of them is jeans designer Tshepo Mohlala. In his early 30s, he has the relaxed smile of a man at ease with the world. His workshop is filled with finely tailored trousers of a brilliant blue. The Tshepo logo is a three-pointed

crown, he tells me, to honour the matriarchs who raised him: his mother, grandmother and aunt.

I wander to the Jukskei River, which runs through the site. On its banks environmental artist Io Makandal is working on a large wall stencil made from moss, which will read 'Be The River'. "I was commissioned to create a public artwork," she explains. "The moss will grow and reshape the form of the letters."

Victoria Yards is just one Jo'burg project putting creativity at its core. A three-minute taxi ride away is the Living Artists Emporium, which provides materials and gallery space for 22 local artists. The work is bold and riotously colourful. Splash Motong's vivid depictions of township life stand next to Kelvin Dube's human sculptures, made from discarded rubber wire, while Nisty Chatha's acrylic-covered canvases blaze with joy.

And then there's Maboneng, once a district for manufacturing. It was given a cash injection by a developer in 2008 and its new name in 2010: Maboneng means 'place of light'. Despite financial setbacks, it now crackles with creative energy.

It's a part of Jo'burg that moves to its own beat. People amble along Fox Street, its tree-lined main drag, where vendors sell fresh melon and pineapple, and art emblazons the brickwork. Music drifts everywhere. Its longest-standing restaurant, Pata Pata, serves peri-peri chicken and is named after the 1960s song written in the city by late singer-activist Miriam Makeba. I pass a youngster taking a selfie with local musician Samthing Soweto outside a streetwear boutique. Jazz echoes from Bertrand Café as couples share wine.

At print workshop David Krut Projects, Sbhongiseni Khulu talks me through the district's short life. "Maboneng started off on a high, then flew too close to the sun, like Icarus," he says with a smile. "Now the neighbourhood's found its feet again, It's cultivated a new creative environment."

I'm shown around the performance rooms of the Centre of the Less Good Idea by Athena Mazarakis. It puts on plays, concerts and exhibitions, with a difference. "It's not about showcasing the perfect idea," Athena says. "We give artists the freedom to experiment, to play, to fail, to follow their impulses."

Outside, the city churns away, all noise and flow. "Ideas have cracks," Athena says, "but through those cracks, other ideas emerge." It strikes me that this can be applied to Jo'burg itself. It might be a city of sleepless intensity, but it's also a place where creativity and reinvention can burst through to the fore. **BL**

**HOW TO DO IT:** Stay at Hallmark House, which has original artworks, a rooftop terrace and basement jazz bar. From 1,080 ZAR (£45) per night, B&B. [hallmarkhouse.info](http://hallmarkhouse.info)



**Q&A**  
**Bheki Dube**  
**Chair of**  
**Maboneng Civic**  
**Association**

**Where do you like to relax away from Maboneng?**

I go to the Goodman Gallery, which is fantastic for contemporary South African art. I'm also a big fan of The Bioscope, a single-screen independent cinema in the north of the city. It has less than 50 seats but it's a really cool space.

**And outside of the city?**

I love the Eastern Cape, particularly around Coffee Bay. It's a different world out there. The coastline hiking is amazing. It gives me a sense of clarity and serenity.

**Which other South African art spaces would you recommend?**

I spend a lot of time in Cape Town. Chimurenga Factory is a great pan-African bookstore with events, and Zeitz MOCAA is a really well-curated contemporary art museum.



tall peaks | deep canyon

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## GREAT TRAIN JOURNEYS

Riding the rails across South Africa can make for an unforgettable adventure — here are three highlights

### THE BLUE TRAIN

Long considered one of the world's top luxury rail experiences, The Blue Train trundles in regal fashion between Cape Town and Pretoria (or vice versa), its sapphire carriages making the 994-mile journey over three days and two nights. The service has been running in some form for a century, and kings, rock stars and Nelson Mandela himself have all walked its carpeted corridors. It's not cheap, but tickets include butler service, high tea, fine food and drink, goose-down bedding and, in some suites, full-size bathtubs. The scenery is no less of a draw — from the vast bushland of the Karoo to the rugged peaks of the Hex River Mountains.

*From 32,435 ZAR (£1,360) per person.*

[bluetrain.co.za](http://bluetrain.co.za)

### SHOSHOLOZA MEYL

This well-priced sleeper train network is waking up after a long doze. Its longstanding services connected major cities around South Africa until operations were derailed by the pandemic. The scenic Johannesburg to Cape Town route returned in 2023, taking 26 to 30 hours each way. The trains offer economy (seated) or tourist class, the latter with two- and four-berth sleeping compartments and shared hot showers. There's also a dining car on board from which to appreciate the sweeping landscapes over a local tipple. The rolling winelands around Cape Town are a highlight.

*Johannesburg to Cape Town from 690 ZAR (£29)*

*per person. [shosholozameyl.co.za](http://shosholozameyl.co.za)*

### ROVOS RAIL

Rovos Rail has a broad selection of five-star, luxury train journeys around southern Africa. They include the two-night Durban Safari, which runs between Pretoria and Durban in KwaZulu-Natal province. A highlight of the itinerary are the two game drives, in the private reserve of Nambiti Conservancy, home to the Big Five, and in Spionkop Reserve at the foot of the Drakensberg mountains. Spionkop was also the site of a battle during the Second Boer War, and a historian helps bring the story to life for passengers. There's an air of vintage luxury on board, with comfortable suites, fine china and an observation car with open-air balcony.

*Durban Safari from R31,200 (£1,305) per person.*

[rovos.com](http://rovos.com) **BL**



From top: A deluxe double suite on a Rovos Rail train; a chef plating crayfish on The Blue Train





The small town of Wilderness, which lies on the Garden Route in the Western Cape

#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic have daily direct flights to Cape Town from Heathrow, and BA also flies several times a week from Gatwick. Both airlines have direct flights each day to Johannesburg from Heathrow, too. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)

**Average flight time:** Around 11h.

Long-distance buses connect cities and major towns across the country, offering a good-value way to get around. Operators include Intercap and Greyhound; the latter runs more basic CitiLink buses as well as Dreamliners, which offer greater comfort over long journeys, with

reclining seats and more leg room.

[greyhound.co.za](http://greyhound.co.za) [intercape.co.za](http://intercape.co.za)

For more flexibility, consider hiring a car. Drive South Africa is a booking agent that offers vehicles at competitive prices from leading rental companies such as Avis and Europcar. [drivesouthafrica.com](http://drivesouthafrica.com)

If you're not in any hurry, the long-distance intercity Shosholoza Meyl train service (p.83) is a great and inexpensive way to see some of South Africa as you travel. If money's less of an issue, consider The Shongololo Express: its 15-day African Trilogy trip includes a Kruger National Park game

drive and the Drakensberg Mountains. [shosholozameyl.co.za](http://shosholozameyl.co.za) [shongololo.com](http://shongololo.com)

There's an extensive domestic airline network, with carriers connecting both major terminals and tiny private airstrips. Local operators include South African Airways and Fly Safair. [flysaa.com](http://flysaa.com) [flysafair.co.za](http://flysafair.co.za)

#### WHEN TO GO

South Africa is a year-round destination and warm days are not uncommon, even in the coldest months of June, July and August. The wet season generally runs from October to March, coinciding with summer temperatures that regularly

hit 30C and above; coastal regions get more rain during this period. There are regional differences, however; the Western Cape, for example, tends to remain dry during the summer.

Visit between July and November for whale-watching season. The May to September dry season is good for other wildlife-viewing, with less-dense vegetation making it easier to spot animals in the undergrowth.

#### MORE INFO

[southafrica.net](http://southafrica.net)

*Lonely Planet South Africa, Lesotho & Eswatini*, £17.99



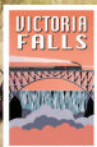


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[rovos.com](http://rovos.com)



*Great Southern Africa Train Adventures*



# Between the lines

TAKE THE SLEEPER TRAIN TO THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS TO STRIKE OUT ON AN ADVENTURE THROUGH SOME OF THE WILDEST, MOST REMOTE TERRAIN IN EUROPE

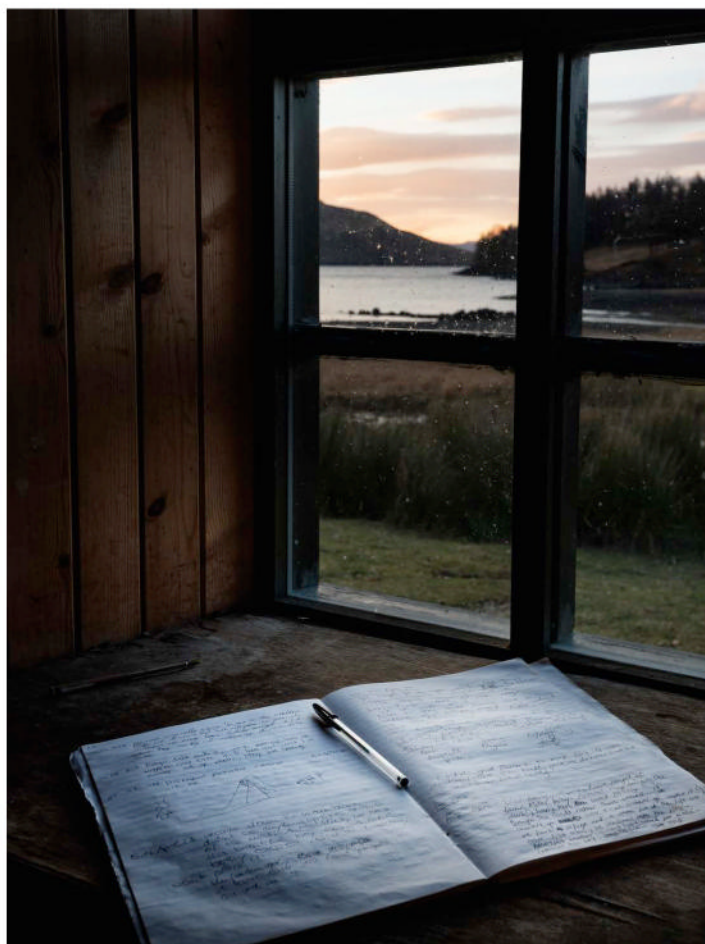
WORDS: OLIVER SMITH  
PHOTOGRAPHS: JUSTIN FOULKES











Look at a map of the British railway network. You will see for the most part it's a tangle of mainlines and branchlines: a mesh stitched in a way to serve most corners of the island. Direct your gaze north, and you see the Scottish Highlands is an exception. It's served by only a few lonely lines, trailing away from the rest of the network like loose threads from a ball of wool. Two of these threads — the West Highland Line and the Highland Main Line — wander in parallel north, come tantalisingly close to knotting together, then unspool in opposite directions. Between them is a blank expanse where no rails pass. A place where none of the cartographer's ink was spent.

I had long seen this part of the map — the space between the lines — and regarded it as something rather like a gulf to be bridged. But in the 22-mile divide between Corroon station on the West Highland Line and Dalwhinnie station on the Highland Main Line, there is no public transport, no public roads. Nor are there marked footpaths that fully connect the two stations. Rather there lies some of the roughest, most remote terrain in Western Europe, a crossing obstructed by hulking mountains and passes of famous treachery. To make the crossing between those lines entails a two- to three-day expedition through the wild heart of the Highlands. A journey that must partly be done on two rails, partly on two feet.

We were a team of two: myself and my friend Al. We first planned to make the crossing in early autumn — when leaves were reddening and stags rutting. Delays saw the trip pushed into November, when deer herds descended from the mountains, and the first frosts snuck into the glens. By the time our expedition set out, winter was making an unscheduled early arrival. Rime ice wreathed lineside fences. Heavy snowfall was timetabled to arrive soon after our northbound train.

### Northbound through the night

One spring night in 1873, the UK's first sleeper service departed from London King's Cross for Glasgow. A 'sleeper' train was an idea stolen from the United States — advertisements subsequently billed them as 'The Most Interesting Route to Scotland', offering a chance to 'Travel in your Pyjamas'. The fortunes of sleepers waxed and waned over the following 150 years — victims of faster daytime trains and budget airlines, and easy prey to the politician's axe. The modern Caledonian Sleeper departing from Platform One of London Euston station is a rare inheritor of this Victorian tradition. It takes much the same route as the 1873 sleeper, and retains some of its predecessor's magic.

In the dining car there is a foretaste of Scotland: haggis and Tunnock's caramel logs on the menu, and seven single malt whiskies

From left: The visitor book and fireplace at remote Ben Alder Cottage; descending from Ben Alder into the pass of Bealach Dubh. Previous pages: Setting out from Corroon station towards Loch Ossian, with Bealach Dubh on the horizon and the Ben Alder massif to its right













at the bar. There is a diverse cast of customers — oil traders bound for Aberdeen, hillwalkers off to Ben Nevis, and one man travelling alone with his ginger cat.

The train heaves out of the concrete behemoth of Euston. Nightcaps are served beneath the Chilterns. Most customers are snoring by Crewe. Tracksides goings-on subtly weave into passengers' dreams: the bellow of a freight train at Penrith. The sudden stillness of a small-hours station in the Borders. Once I wake for a midnight wee, and see a full moon rising over obsidian Pennine hills. I think of WH Auden's poem, *Night Mail* — both a description of a Scotland-bound night train and a meditation on the lines of communication that connect humanity: 'This is the night mail crossing the Border, bringing the cheque and the postal order...'

In a few ways, travelling by sleeper stirs a childlike wonder. You climb into your bunk, trusting you will be ushered unconscious to your destination, like a baby dozing in a pushchair. You are rocked by the rhythmic lullaby of the rails. But the greatest wonder comes when you wake and part the cabin curtains, like opening wrapping paper on your birthday. The rush hour clamour of London has segued to silent wilderness. Lochs and lochans shimmer in the day's first light. Munros glower down on the train, their lower slopes stiff with frozen heather, their upper

slopes sugared with snow. The trudge of London commuters has turned to the strut of an Imperial stag. You have travelled from one of Europe's most densely inhabited corners to one of its most sparsely inhabited nooks — merely by closing your eyes.

Our destination, Corroeur station, materialises out of blanket bog soon after breakfast. Corroeur sees about 12,000 passengers per year — which is roughly the same as Euston gets in a single peak-time hour. It's also the highest station in the UK, and inaccessible by public roads. A station building houses a cafe serving those who come for the novelty factor but, as we draw in, we see a sign has been placed by the front door: 'Closed for the Season'.

On a sleeper train you inhabit a pocket of comfort — a roving ambassador for civilised living — with hot showers, hot food, soft beds and attendants summoned at the press of a button. With a single step onto the platform at Corroeur you begin to exile yourself from the trappings of modernity — entering a landscape where people are scarce, help can be distant, and sharp air is largely undisturbed by mobile reception. You enter a place beyond railway lines, telephone lines and electricity lines. The transition is abrupt. Suddenly you must stand on your own two feet.

As we get ready to disembark, Alec, one of the sleeper attendants, asks where we

From left: Ben Alder Cottage stands by the shores of Loch Ericht; frozen branches in Loch Ericht forest; a horse grazes by the loch, with deer in the trees behind



are heading. We explain we plan to walk to Dalwhinnie station, where we will catch a return sleeper to London in three days. In our rucksacks there's food and shelter to sustain us; fastened to the straps are ice axes and crampons to traverse snowbound gradients. Minutes later we are on the platform, watching the train sweep into the distance, the rails ringing in its wake. In the silence that follows, Alec's words echo in my head: "Rather you than me, lads."

### The ghosts of the Bealach Dubh

You may have seen Corrour station in the 1996 film *Trainspotting*, in the scene where Tommy takes the group to the Highlands.

"Now what?" asks Sick Boy

"We go for a walk," says Tommy.

"Are you serious?"

The group gets roughly 100m from the station before turning back for Edinburgh.

Our first miles take us along a track by Loch Ossian, through shoreside forests of larch and Scots pine. The winter sun clears the hills, blessing bronze moorland with its golden rays. To our east, ranks of grey clouds assemble, heavy with snow yet to fall. For now, the weather is merciful. A lone buzzard watches us from a treetop. Around lunchtime we meet the only other walker on our trail: Jessie Guilliatt has been foraging in the forests, returning with a handful of hedgehog mushrooms.

She is from the Mornington Peninsula in the Australian state of Victoria, and has come to Scotland after selling her farm. Seeing the Northern Lights dancing in the skies above Cape Wrath in the northwest was, she says, the closest she has come to sensing the divine. "You just get a feeling here," she says of the Highlands. "The sense of space. The fact that you could never see it all, even in a lifetime."

Beyond the eastern shores of the loch, the forests thin out. Past the lodge at Corrour, the track narrows to a vague trail and begins its ascent to a desolate pass: the Bealach Dubh (black pass). Here, our route shadows quickening streams. We cross them, balancing ourselves on stepping stones lacquered with ice. Midway, Jessie peels off to cook up her mushrooms with coriander and noodles.

Many Highland passes have their ghosts. Bealach Dubh has more than most. In December 1942, a Wellington bomber was on a training mission from RAF Lossiemouth when it went off course, crashing into a mountainside during a blizzard. From the crew of six there was a lone survivor — air gunner Sergeant Philip Underwood, himself seriously injured. After checking for signs of life in his comrades, he set out on our path — albeit in the opposite direction, out of the pass. For a few lonely miles, the snow raged around him, his injuries doubtless smarting with every step. By a miracle, he found help at the hunting lodge at Corrour, and later recovered. So remote is the crash site, the wreckage of the Wellington has never been fully cleared. Bits of the engine can be seen rusting in the hills.

Nine years later, another disaster took place. Five members of a local mountaineering club were caught in a storm just before New Year's Eve 1951. One hundred mph winds thundered through the night and, one by one, four young men succumbed to exposure. Again there was a lone survivor — the wife of one of the men, who traced the lonely miles to Corrour Lodge.

The intended destination of the club members that New Year had been Ben Alder Cottage, a bothy by the shores of Loch Ericht. On a more peaceful winter day, it is ours, too. Scotland is full of bothies — shelters often

Clockwise from top:  
Dawn over the Ben Alder  
massif, looking back  
towards Bealach Dubh;  
a whisky tasting flight  
and historic equipment  
at Dalwhinnie Distillery







# ***Power-Ready Anytime***

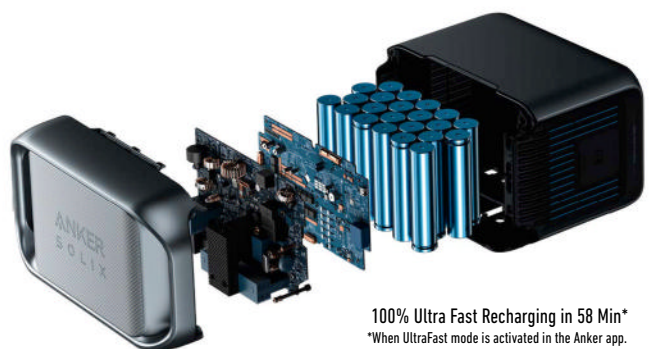
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## Easy Highland walks

### LOCH OSSIAN CIRCUIT

Loch Ossian can be walked as a simple, well-defined circuit out of Corroir station, following flat, well-marked tracks for nine miles through pine forests. Use the OS Explorer 385 map.

### LOCH AN EILEIN

Another much-loved walk unfurls 25 miles north east of Dalwhinnie. Follow paths for three miles along the shores of Loch an Eilein, with views of a little island home to a medieval castle, and the foothills of the Cairngorms rising beyond. Use OS Explorer OL57.

### WEST HIGHLAND WAY

Disembark the West Highland Line at Bridge of Orchy to tackle part of Scotland's most popular long-distance path, the West Highland Way. This 36-mile section, taking two or three days, finishes at Fort William, passing through the landscapes of Glencoe and under Ben Nevis. [macsadventure.com](http://macsadventure.com)

repurposed from derelict crofter's cottages. They are without electricity, bedding and flushing toilets and are all unstaffed — unless you count the resident mice. They offer little more than a roof over your head — and sometimes even this leaks — and yet after long hours tramping through the Highland wilderness, their appearance can be a profound blessing.

In the pantheon of Highland bothies, Ben Alder Cottage ranks high, partly on account of its remoteness, but also because it's said to be its most haunted. Nine hours' march from Corroir we fling our packs on its stone floor, and hunt out firewood for the hearth. Soon the only sound is the toothless whistle of the wind in the chimney and the crackle of pine cones in the fireplace. When we switch off our head torches we are part of a scene unchanged for centuries: wayfarers huddled by a fire, the flicker and shadow duelling against the walls.

There are many stories of hauntings at Ben Alder Cottage. One ghost is a woman who sought refuge here with her child in a storm, and — when driven mad by hunger — ate her offspring. Another is a resident gamekeeper who hanged himself in this lonely hut. Both are historically dubious, yet the bothy guestbook is full of reports of unexplained footsteps and sudden chills. It's a place to seek the ghosts of the past in more benign ways, too. One recent entry is from a visitor who had been here on their birthday, to this Highland sanctuary where their parents had met 50 years previously and bonded over a bottle of brandy. The two were married three weeks

after. "[Dad] is no longer with us, and so we came here to raise a glass of brandy," goes the entry, "... and to sing."

### The snows of Ben Alder

We rise before dawn to push to the summit of Ben Alder. With every metre gained the temperature drops; clouds of vapour plume skywards with every spent breath. And then I hear a ringing sound — like the tinkling of distant bells — and think it's a warning. The ringing grows louder. Resting on a granite outcrop, I realise what it is: the water bottle in my backpack clinking with freshly formed ice.

Ben Alder is the 1,148m mountain that stands sentry over the gap between the railway lines. The Bealach Dubh had been a place people escaped from; yet Ben Alder's remoteness had cast it as a place to escape to — somewhere you might become anonymous. Bonnie Prince Charlie, the leader of the Jacobite Rising fighting to claim the throne for his exiled father, is said to have hidden here in the wake of his defeat at the 1746 Battle of Culloden. He was joined by fugitive clan leader Cluny Macpherson, who somehow survived for nine years in the Highlands, undetected by the authorities.

In 1996, Ben Alder hit national news after the discovery of a body near the summit. The so-called 'Man with No Name' had shed all forms of identification, cut labels from his clothing and climbed Ben Alder to kill himself with an antique-style revolver. His final view had been from a rocky outcrop, overlooking a little loch. His corpse had lain undiscovered





in the snow for months; another year of press intrigue passed before he was identified as a French water board worker.

In truth, Ben Alder is less a conventional peak, more a plateau: an upland kingdom where winter's reign is uncontested through much of the year. Crossing it, we encounter many species of snow. First: flurries of feather-soft snow that dust our backpacks and dew our paper maps. On the summit: vengeful snow that spits in our eyes as the windchill hits -10 C. For a few frightening hours, a whiteout sees snow and cloud coalesce into a single state of blankness.

By evening, we make our exit — tracing moonlit paths of lilac snow off the plateau, pitching camp by a pine forest and pushing accumulating drifts off our tent roof. Across Britain, holidaymakers craving a fix of winter snowfall are fleeing to Scandinavia or the Alps; meanwhile, up on the roof of the country, we are ensconced in this pocket Arctic, where the only footsteps are our own — though these too are soon erased by fresh flurries.

### Fire from snow

Hidden in the foothills north east of Ben Alder is a little body of water: Lochan na Doire-uaine. From the loch, a watercourse chunters for some miles eastward through the hills, supplying water for the Dalwhinnie whisky distillery. On our final day, we walk in parallel to its course, pacing a forester's track by Loch Ericht. Eventually the chimneys of the distillery appear on the horizon. We arrive exhausted and exalted at our finishing line.

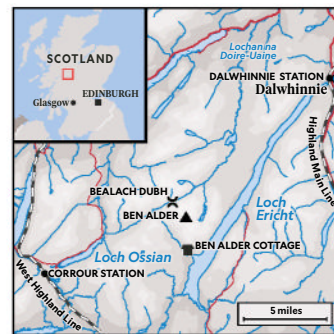
“Dalwhinnie in Gaelic means ‘the meeting place’,” says distillery guide Peter Wemyss, as he leads us through warehouses full of stacked casks. “It was where old drovers gathered with their cattle before heading south. This has always been a place where people gather.”

Dalwhinnie is also where our path meets the railway line — Peter explains casks were once exported by rail from the station next door. We seek temporary sanctuary in the distillery, amidst hot copper stills that thaw our extremities, tasting single malts that warm our bellies. Feeling the slow fire of whisky in our throats, it's curious to think this liquid began as snows that fell on the foothills of Ben Alder, many winters ago.

It's after dark when the southbound Caledonian Sleeper hauls into Dalwhinnie. As we speed south, I lie in my bunk thinking of Bruce Chatwin's classic book *The Songlines*. In it the legendary travel writer outlines his theory that man, in his true state, is a nomadic creature, destined and designed to walk the Earth on foot. But most intriguing is Chatwin's evidence for our innate nomadism: that children still have to be rocked to sleep, and to soothe their young, parents recreate the motion of ancient ancestors who carried their offspring while walking to new pastures. Being on the move meant all was well.

Soon I enter a deep sleep in my bunk, the carriage rocking beneath my mattress, the train moving through the tangle of railway lines that bind this country. But I am still dreaming of the mountains and passes that lie in between. □

Left: Looking back towards Corroul from the route to Ben Alder  
Previous page: Dalwhinnie is the joint-highest distillery in Scotland



### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Corroul is served by the Caledonian Sleeper service between London Euston, Crewe, Preston and Fort William, while Dalwhinnie is served by a sister service that runs between Euston and Inverness. Accommodation on board includes seats as well as private berths, available with and without en suite. Single berths from London to Fort William cost £140. [sleeper.scot](https://sleeper.scot) Dalwhinnie and Corroul are both served by daytime ScotRail trains from stations such as Glasgow Queen Street. [scotrail.co.uk](https://scotrail.co.uk)

### WHEN TO GO

The Corroul–Dalwhinnie crossing is a significant undertaking, appropriate for experienced hillwalkers with good fitness and navigation skills, who are comfortable with heavy packs. In winter, you'll need to bring an ice axe and crampons and have the skills to use them; be aware of avalanche risk in passes like the Bealach Dubh. A good time to cross is late spring, April to May, after most of the snow has melted but before Scotland's midge season.

### WINTER COURSES

For courses in Scottish winter skills try Glenmore Lodge in the Cairngorms or Scotland-based courses from the Plas y Brenin National Outdoor Centre. [glenmorelodge.org.uk](https://glenmorelodge.org.uk) [pyb.co.uk](https://pyb.co.uk)

### WHERE TO STAY

Loch Ossian Youth Hostel. From £23, shared room. [hostellingscotland.org.uk](https://hostellingscotland.org.uk) Ben Alder Cottage. Free, donations accepted. [mountainbothies.org.uk](https://mountainbothies.org.uk)





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Inspiration

- on [sbb.ch/en/gotthard-panorama-express](https://sbb.ch/en/gotthard-panorama-express) or
- on instagram @gotthardpanoramaexpress



# Land of the blessed



FROM VOLCANIC PEAKS TO CORAL-FRINGED SHORES,  
HOPPING BETWEEN THE CARIBBEAN ISLANDS OF ST VINCENT  
& THE GRENADINES IS BLISSFULLY EASY

WORDS: SARAH BARRELL. PHOTOGRAPHS: KAROLINA WIERCIGROCH







Tour guide Desron 'Lava Man'  
Rodriguez follows a hiker up the  
lower slopes of La Soufrière along the  
volcano's summit trail  
Previous pages, from left: The beach at  
Petit Bateau, Tobago Cays Marine Park;  
Manning Village, St Vincent





# “It felt like a jumbo jet taking off. The rumbling, the ground shaking.”

Desron ‘Lava Man’ Rodriguez is a person of few words, but those he does utter can stop you in your tracks — for this mild-mannered, softly spoken Vincentian can detail what it’s like to climb an erupting volcano. “I didn’t want anyone else telling me how it was up there,” he answers to the inevitable question: why? “I had to witness it with my own eyes.”

We’re winding through the ashy foothills of La Soufrière, the still-smouldering stratavolcano that dominates St Vincent’s northernmost tip. The largest and most densely populated of the 32 islands and cays that make up St Vincent & the Grenadines, this volcanic isle is a West Indies wonder. Black sand beaches are backed by small villages half-mooned around Caribbean bays devoid of international resort development. And St Vincent’s windward Atlantic shores are wilder still. Its densely forested cliffs are home to more goats than people, and they graze amid palms and surf-sprayed cactuses.

We head inland from the ocean shores just beyond Georgetown, where the road rides over Rabacca Dry River, a gulch carved out by a 1902 eruption. Its banks are once again deep in grey volcanic ash, from La Soufrière’s latest blast in 2021. At the road’s end, La Soufrière’s four-mile out-and-back summit trail has been cleared and reopened, climbing steeply over 576m. It’s a journey Lava Man often makes twice a day — guiding visitors or just for fun, as he’s done since he was a child. “I’ve always liked being outside, in nature,” he says. And why should the top blowing off the mountain interrupt his daily walks?

In March 2021, La Soufrière began notable ‘effusive’ action, exhaling clouds of gas, with the underground magma activity sending tremors through the island.

On 9 April, the seismic research centre at University of the West Indies (UWI), with its customary exactitude, predicted a full explosion within 48 hours, advising islanders in the northern ‘red zone’ to evacuate immediately. But some didn’t leave — a minor eruption in 1979 perhaps still lingering in local consciousness, creating a false sense of ease. Lava Man didn’t evacuate. In fact, he drove into the red zone, making tracks through ash-thick roads, small volcanic rocks raining down. “You’d hear ‘pow pow’ as they hit the ground. One cracked my windscreen,” he tells me. Then he climbed the mountain wearing a gas mask to film what was happening at the top. “I had to go around trees on the ground, the path was gone. But I know the way even with my eyes shut.”

Over the course of the volcano’s two weeks of eruptions, he made the journey several times. At first, his Soufrière YouTube streams turned islanders against him, his actions labelled “doltish” by the lead UWI scientist Professor Richard Robertson. “But when people saw the mountain on fire?” Lava Man says of his ash-blasted broadcasts, “they really started evacuating then.” When he was finally caught by island police, islanders rallied for his release. Subsequently christened Lava Man, Desron is now the go-to guide for adventurers on the island. “But that’s not why I did it. And I wouldn’t do it again. I got my turn,” he says quietly, before adding with a self-effacing shrug, “God is great.”

Unlike the devastating 1902 explosion, La Soufrière took no lives in 2021. And while its scorched summit is now a moonscape — accessible via a final steep scramble that demands fitness and hiking boots — lush vegetation has already reclaimed lower slopes. “It’s amazing,” says Julicia





Quency John and Daren Simons  
from Affection Tours on their  
boat in Carnash Bay, Mayreau  
Right: The beach at Young  
Island Resort, St Vincent

Lewis, another local guide joining our hike today. "It all came back so quickly." We look down onto a thick forest of palms, banyan and bread fruit trees unfurling towards the coast at Georgetown. "To think, for weeks after the eruption, we had no water," she says. "Ash got in reservoirs. We needed damp towels on windows to keep the ash out. And it still got *everywhere*." She laughs now, but this young Vincentian woman actually gave birth to her second child the day before the eruption, bringing the newborn home to her house in the capital, Kingstown, as islanders flooded in from the evacuated north.

"We're resilient people," she says with a smile. "We help each other." She picks up a five-fronded leaf fallen from a trumpet tree, brown and curled inwards like a giant arthritic hand. "I want to make some tea and they're no good for that if they're still green," she tells me. Whether it's to 'cool the blood', soothe griping stomachs or fight a cold, which Julicia feels coming on, there's little that bush tea can't cure according to Vincentian lore. "My grandma made it, my mother too. It's still a thing," she says at a whisper as we stop to view a hovering hummingbird. "I once heard a parrot here," says Julicia of national bird, the St Vincent Amazon parrot. "I think it got confused after the eruption. Their habitat is further south."

We don't spot the rainbow plumage of this endangered species, but there are bright orange wings of paradise plants and chandeliers of epiphytes spilling from the canopy through tangles of strangler fig trees, the beginnings and endings of plants hard to fathom. But Julicia has her quarry. "Got it! I've been looking to show you this," she announces as she lays a fern leaf on her

forearm, gives it a sharp slap and pulls it back to reveal the perfect imprint of its every tiny, feathery frond on her skin rendered in a chalky white sap. "We call it clap-hand," she says, grinning. "We loved it as kids. My mum adds it to trumpet tea for that extra healing touch."

### From rainforest to reef

The Carib name for St Vincent, 'Hairouna' means Land of the Blessed, and for all La Soufrière's devastation it has also blessed the island with rich volcanic soil in which an abundance of edible, medicinal and grazing crop plants thrive. Heading back south, we pass a roadside memorial to the 'Defender of Hairouna'. Buffeted by Atlantic winds, this paint-peeling plaque is dedicated to St Vincent's national hero, Joseph Chatoyer. Also known as Satuye, the Garifuna Carib chief, with his troops of tenacious locals and runaway shipwrecked slaves, held off British control of St Vincent for decades during the Carib Wars. He was finally killed in battle in 1795. Two centuries of British rule followed, but where sugar and banana plantation crops have dominated many Caribbean islands before and since emancipation, St Vincent, with its rich volcanic soil, has diversified to become the region's fruit bowl.

"It'll make you strong!" urges a woman selling freshly chopped callaloo in Kingstown market. In contrast to the capital's florid colonial churches and ballast-stone clapboard houses, its concrete-block market is a functional affair — but a Caribbean powerhouse no less, supplying the West Indies with a boggling range of produce including dried sea moss, local honey, ginger, sorrel, nutmeg and arrowroot. The market resounds with the clang of works









currently enlarging the island's cargo port across the street, but despite this, and the international airport that opened in 2017, St Vincent remains low key. Leaving the capital, we explore deserted beaches black with the island's ubiquitous volcanic sand that diamond-sparkles in the sun. "People think it'll be rough but it's so soft, right?" says Julicia at my idiot grin as we paddle in the surf, the sand like velvet underfoot.

A rare strip of imported white sand graces the beach at Young Island. This one-hotel destination is accessed by a three-minute ferry journey, summoned from a phone in the small dock near Villa Beach. St Vincent will open a Sandals Resort this spring, but for now, Young Island's confection of thatched cottage-suites characterises St Vincent's locally run accommodation offering. I fall asleep to the crash of waves, the croak of frogs and the sound of soca music from Villa's small strip of bars — more or less distant depending on which way the wind blows.

Sitting pretty in the southern Caribbean, between St Lucia and Grenada, St Vincent & the Grenadines doesn't lack castaway opportunities — and with a network of ferries and twin-prop planes, island-hopping is affordable and easy. The following morning, a 20-minute flight takes me low over a patchwork of Grenadine islands haloed in blues of impossibly brilliant hues. It's as much bucket-list thrill as A-to-B journey. Barely 20 minutes by motorboat from the shores of Union Island, where we touch down, I'm out into that turquoise water, nose to snout with hawkbill

and green turtles grazing in the seagrass at Tobago Cays Marine Park.

This pristine protected reserve was a filming location for the Pirates of the Caribbean franchise. We skirt the shores of Petit Tabac, the palm-bristly sand spit where Kiera Knightly's Elizabeth Swan shouts at Johnny Depp's rum-drunk Captain Sparrow in *The Curse of the Black Pearl*. On neighbouring Petit Bateau, I sample a dark, spiced Vincentian rum named after the 17th-century brigand John 'Sparrow' Ward who inspired the movies. Sailors have long favoured this tiny island for rum punches, conch and lobster barbecue. "In my dad's day it was just a beach bonfire. Things have changed," says Carlos Peters, smiling as he indicates a newly built kitchen shelter with gas grills. Carlos heads up an association of 22 'boat boys' who taxi guests from their yachts to dine surf-side on fresh catch. "We're trying to regulate things more — how many boats operate, how much fish is caught and sold. Some old-timers don't like it, but it's the only way this is sustainable for everyone."

Local business is crucial for communities in the Grenadines — a place plied by self-sufficient cruise ships and famed for exclusive resort islands like Mustique (a 1970s favourite of Jagger, Bowie and Princess Margaret) and Canouan (where, so the local joke goes, billionaires go to escape the millionaires). On Mayreau, a 1.5sq mile hill ringed with white sand and coral reefs that's the only populated island within Tobago Cays' reserve — I meet John

From left: The views of Tobago Cays Marine Park from Petit Bateau; Silica Simon grills fresh lobsters at Carlos Peters' Beach BBQ, on Petit Bateau; fresh callaloo leaves for sale at New Central Market in Kingstown, St Vincent



Roache. Tall and statesman-like, the former history teacher dedicates his time to community development, including tutoring local children. “Mayreau’s population is about 300 and 70% are young people,” he tells me as we watch two boys dip-fish with buckets off the dock. “We’re a transit for marijuana,” he says of the nation’s licence to export the crop to select countries where it’s legal; locally it was decriminalised for personal or medical use in 2018. “This can change our youngsters. They need careful direction.”

John’s work-in-progress book, *Wahya* (‘who we are’), explores the Grenadines’ history. St Vincent and the Grenadines was the last of the West Indies’ Windward Islands to be ceded from the British, in 1979. “A daily issue in the Caribbean is succession. Lots of people left after independence.” And despite his development work, he says, “many in Mayreau still today don’t own their land”. When not teaching, John runs the island’s sole grocery store, where he displays the multiple prizes he’s won for good works, proudly showing me letters of commendation from Queen Elizabeth II. “We must embrace the complex multiplicity of our Caribbean nation,” he says of this perhaps surprisingly loyalist display. “We’re Black but also English, Irish and Asian. To progress, we need to bring all of us into the fold.”

### Nation builders

Masani Defreitas is singing in Swahili. It’s rehearsal time at Ashton community centre on Union Island, a brief pre-dusk moment bringing biting sandflies, and we’re all

trying not to fidget. Dressed in a Ghanaian headscarf and skirt, Masani has her crew in check. As her voice rises, a 15-strong contingent from the Imani Cultural Organization joins her in a chorus of song and drumming. The dancers pause, and their previous barefoot steps, spins and jumps give space to electrifying sound. “Our DNA on Union Island traces back to West Africa,” says Masani at the song’s close.

Whether in Swahili or Creole, Union Island’s folk culture of song and dance is going strong. It’s front and centre of the prestigious Maroon Festival before the rains in May, and weddings here still involve a ‘cake dance’ where women do a tricky ballet of cake balancing. “We also do ‘meeting up’, when bride and groom parties meet in the street for a dance-off,” says Masani. And with that, the group launches into a ‘cherub song’ whose lyrics chide a man for being too late: his girl’s marrying someone else. The dancers — tonight ranging in age from seven to 17, and one adult — tag each other in and out of the circle. “I started this group in 1986. Some kids are now adults but still dance with me. We’re currently raising funds for a Ghana cultural exchange. I want these children to understand where they’re from.”

Union Island is in the business of preservation. Just three miles long and one wide, this coral-fringed idyll was once little-known to outsiders beyond sailors and kitesurfers. But in 2005, a new species of gecko was discovered here by local citizen-scientists Mark da Silva and Matthew Harvey, putting Union on the map. “We were





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actually investigating tarantula habitat,” says Matthew, when I meet him in the tiny settlement of Pauper’s Land on the south coast. “But we knew we’d found something new.” The subsequent scientific paper, inadvertently pinpointing these exquisite jewelled creatures, saw them poached into endangered territory by 2018. “People want them as pets,” explains Matthew’s friend, Roseman Adams, another of Union’s home-grown conservationists and co-founder of the Union Island Environmental Alliance.

With the help of partners like Fauna and Flora International, the alliance has since put boots on the ground to deter poachers. They’re a small team but, standing 6ft tall with shoulders seemingly as wide, Roseman is an entire army in himself, albeit one with a disarmingly easy charm. He rounds up six alliance guides to help us explore Union’s peaks, where the lizard’s range is contained in a small tract of forest. “It’s one of the healthiest dry forests in the Caribbean, home to many endemic species. But development is encroaching,” says Roseman of Union’s nascent tourism industry.

The guides stride ahead through the trees, bringing back two geckos in a lensed specimen dish that magnifies the spectacular circular markings on their tiny 3cm bodies. Then they’re released again, location undisclosed. “We’ve learned to be careful,” says Roseman. “Union is one of the poorest islands in the Caribbean. And these creatures are much more valuable to us alive.” The alliance organises tours, the only way to see the geckos, along with sustainable turtle-spotting, and raises money for Union’s ultimate challenge: water security.

“We’re reliant on rain for drinking water,” says Roseman as we putter along Chatham Bay in his electric tuk-tuk, getting a wave from everyone we pass. “And people are suffering more shortages with climate change.” He points out rain-capture tanks funded by the alliance. Elsewhere, I spot wells in various states of disrepair, the island’s free-roaming goats and cows in attendance. “Another issue,” says Roseman. “Free-grazing causes crop shortages and erosion. And we need our vegetation. It’s trees that attract rain on tropical islands.” Known as ‘Young Buffalo’, it’s clear Roseman is not easily deterred. “It’s often about simple solutions, but it takes a unified approach,” he says.

We’re able to shelter from the heat thanks to one such simple solution: shady walkways through the mangroves at Ashton Lagoon. An ill-placed causeway to Union’s airport cut off water to the lagoon, home to the Grenadines’ largest mangrove forest. Strategic flush holes engineered by local environmental group SusGren means they’re thriving again — as are the fish, bees and migratory birds that rely on them. Roseman beams. “This is one of the best birding spots in the Caribbean now.”

From Bequia, a two-hour ferry ride away, I can see the Grenadines laid out like jewels. A pickup truck taxi makes short work of the hilly hinterland, climbing through fragrant forests of ylang ylang, cashew and nutmeg to the lookout at Mount Pleasant. Named ‘island of the clouds’ by its early Arawak tribal settlers, Bequia’s sky is clear today, and St Vincent, the Grenadines and even Grenada rise out of the water like stepping stones, enticing travellers onwards. I resist, however. With its string of undeveloped



## ST VINCENT & THE GRENADINES

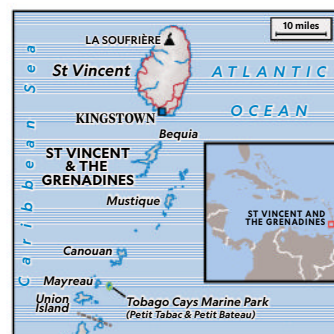


beaches, locally run hotels and relaxed rum shacks, Bequia invites you to linger. It's a place where yachties sail in and end up staying far longer than intended, integrating into island life, opening bars with names like Whaleboner.

In the port, I buy a soursop ice cream at a pink-painted shack, the sun making shorter work of it than I do. I scurry into the shade of Mauvin's Model Boat Shop. Strung with hundreds of immaculately detailed wooden replicas of old Bequian schooners, yachts and rigged rowing boats, the place itself looks ready to set sail. "I started out 40 years ago, using coconut shells," explains Mauvin Hutchins, one of several islanders who make a living from model ships. "People come to Bequia because they love the sea, love to sail. And they want to take a bit of that home with them," he says, polishing the mahogany hull on a model of the island's elegantly masted former ferry, *Friendship Rose*.

Outside, modern motorised car ferries honk their arrivals, summoning passengers to Mayreau, Canouan and beyond. Through the din, loud and clear, the call of a fisherman's conch shell alerts islanders to fresh catch, just as it has done for centuries. "She don't run anymore," says Mauvin, of *Friendship Rose*. "But I guess island life doesn't change that much." □

Above: Handmade model sailing ships on sale at Mauvin's Model Boat Shop on Bequia, an island with a long tradition of shipbuilding, both big and small  
Previous page, from left: Neola Laborde during a traditional drum and dance performance at the Imani Cultural Organization on Union Island; an iguana climbing a holdback tree, Union Island



### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Virgin Atlantic flies between Heathrow and St Vincent three times a week, including a short stop in Barbados. [virginatlantic.com](http://virginatlantic.com)

**Average flight time:** 11h.

British Airways and Virgin Atlantic fly from the UK to Barbados. Virgin Atlantic, SVG Air and Caribbean Airlines fly on to St Vincent and the Grenadines. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [flysvgair.com](http://flysvgair.com) Ferries run between St Vincent and the Grenadines. Fast services around 30 minutes, and multi-island routes around 5hrs. [discoversvg.com](http://discoversvg.com) SVG Air operates daily inter-island flights between St Vincent and the Grenadines. Flight time 15-30 minutes. Islands are small but distances are deceptive due to steep, winding roads.

### WHEN TO GO

It's hot and humid year-round, with average highs of 31C. June to December sees passing storms. December to February and Easter are peak seasons, when it's prudent to book ahead for boat trips, ferries and flights.

### WHERE TO STAY

Young Island Resort, St Vincent. Doubles from US\$428 (£336), B&B. [youngisland.com](http://youngisland.com)  
Hotel Alexandrina, St Vincent. From EC\$365 (£106), room only. [hotelalexandrina.com](http://hotelalexandrina.com)  
The Islander's Inn, Union Island. From US\$100 (£80), B&B. [theislandersinn.com](http://theislandersinn.com)  
Spring Hotel, Bequia. From US\$120 (£95), B&B. [springhotelbequia.com](http://springhotelbequia.com)

### MORE INFO

[discoversvg.com](http://discoversvg.com)

### HOW TO DO IT

Tropical Sky offers seven nights in St Vincent and Bequia from £2,249 per person, including all accommodation, meals and transfers except for the Bequia ferry transfers, which is paid locally. [tropicsky.co.uk](http://tropicsky.co.uk)





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# NOMAD LAND

IN KYRGYZSTAN'S FORMIDABLE TIAN SHAN MOUNTAINS LIES THE SARYCHAT-EERTASH NATURE RESERVE, A PLACE OF DEEP VALLEYS AND WILD RIVERS COURSING BELOW 6,000-METRE PEAKS. EXISTENCE IN THIS REMOTE CORNER OF THE COUNTRY CAN BE INCREDIBLY HARSH. AT FIRST GLANCE, IT SEEMS DEVOID OF LIFE, BUT ANYONE WHO VENTURES HERE DISCOVERS A BEAUTIFUL AND DYNAMIC LAND, HOME TO RARE, ENIGMATIC SNOW LEOPARDS AND OTHER WILDLIFE THAT HIDES DEEP IN THE CREVICES

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIEL ALFORD













Kyrgyzstan's landscapes are incredibly diverse and seem timeless. The capital Bishkek sits on the central Eurasian steppe, a vast grassland stretching from the east of Ukraine to Mongolia. Yurts have been used by nomads on the steppe for thousands of years. Packable, warm and sturdy, they are still used today, offering a perfect shelter in tough conditions. Ancient nomadic horse cultures thrived here, and you can still see it today — horses are a hugely important part of life. Looking out of your car window as you travel, you may spot a game of *kok boru*, a traditional competition in which two teams on horseback try to manoeuvre a goat carcass into the opposing team's goal. Although the goat is replaced by a mould these days, it takes nothing away from the excitement and spectacle.







It takes a drive of two days, one of them off road, climbing 4,000m above sea level, to reach the Sarychat-Eertash Nature Reserve. Established in 1995, it covers more than 500sq miles and was founded to protect its diverse and endangered species, namely the ghostly snow leopard and the argali, the largest species of wild sheep in the world. Bears, wolves and the grumpy-looking Pallas cat also roam here. Conservationists and local people work hard to study and protect the wildlife. Rangers like Omurbek Kurmanaliev and his team swap their 4WD for semi-wild horses to journey deeper into glacial valleys, stopping at old hunting cabins and often sleeping outside.













To aid the conservation effort, locals like Elaman Omurbekov are employed as rangers by the Snow Leopard Foundation, Kyrgyzstan, which works in coordination with the international Snow Leopard Trust. Their local knowledge and their expertise in the high mountains are essential. Many of the rangers used to be herders and hunters, but now they use their skills and experience in the harsh environment to help scientists and filmmakers. The former leave camera traps to monitor wildlife. Triggered automatically by infrared sensors, they can be left for months at a time, providing a unique insight into the secret lives of the animals here.







In recent years, Kyrgyzstan has emerged as a leader in snow leopard conservation, with up to 500 animals estimated to be living in the country, in an area covering 40,540sq miles. Filmmaker, director and co-founder of the Wild Expeditions adventure tour group, Chris Beard works with the Snow Leopard Trust to catalogue sightings and to raise awareness for the reserve, to help ensure its protection. The semi-wild horses the team uses are essential for covering the vast and challenging terrain they work in. The horses are tough and sure-footed, traversing steep paths and frozen rivers with ease. Riding horses here is the ultimate way to experience this wild, savagely beautiful land, transporting the visitor back to the time of the nomads. ▣





# A Canadian Road Trip

Have you ever dreamed of experiencing the pristine wilderness of Canada? There's no better way to do so than by car! Just imagine driving along scenic roads and admiring glaciers through the Icefields Parkway in the Rocky Mountains, or cruising around Vancouver Island and spotting whales off the coast of Victoria.

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## The Big Trip

# Canada by road

WHETHER ALONG POLAR HIGHWAYS, COASTAL ROADS OR THROUGH THE RAINFOREST, TAKING A ROAD TRIP IN CANADA IS TO ENCOUNTER SOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL SIGHTS

Canada is one of the rare places on Earth where wide, well-maintained roads carve their way through remote, uncompromised wilderness. Behind the wheel of a car, you can skirt the icy feet of glaciers, wind through forests populated by foraging megafauna, climb Rocky Mountain slopes and explore storm-sculpted coastlines, where ocean waves are plied by migrating cetaceans. Adventurous travellers can even explore the all-season Dempster Highway, which runs from boreal wilderness north through the Arctic Circle and on to the stark polar coastline.

It's for this reason that road trips are not to be rushed in Canada, a country that's home to the second-longest national highway in the world. Scenic A-to-B drives are a thrill in themselves, but the joy of making it this far into the wilds is allowing plenty of time to get out and explore. After all, across provinces and territories like British Columbia and the Yukon, there are near-endless opportunities for mountain hiking, wild swimming in remote lakes, white-water paddling in a dugout canoe or back-country cycling under endless skies. In Nova Scotia, meanwhile, lighthouses lead drivers to coastal villages, where roadside inns serve seafood

chowders to ancient recipes and words are still spoken in French Acadian and Scottish dialects.

To get where your car or feet won't reach, fly-and-drive opportunities abound. In British Columbia, seaplanes fly low above Pacific temperate rainforests and rugged coastlines, gently setting down on lakes for a spot of bear-watching. Over in the Yukon, small excursion planes access stellar sights like Kluane National Park, which has the world's largest non-polar ice fields.

Motorhomes and RVs are another popular travel choice, allowing your accommodation to come right along with you where it may otherwise be scant — and the country's regions and territories have plenty of campgrounds that supply vehicles with power and water. There's a lot to be said for camping in Canada, be it with a motorhome, the pre-set tents and cabins often available for rent in national parks, or a simple sleeping bag, as long as you follow local guidelines about wildlife and safety. You can expect evenings entirely devoid of light pollution, lit with a dazzling canopy of stars and — season and northerly latitude depending — a never-setting sun or heavenly displays from the Northern Lights. **SARAH BARRELL**

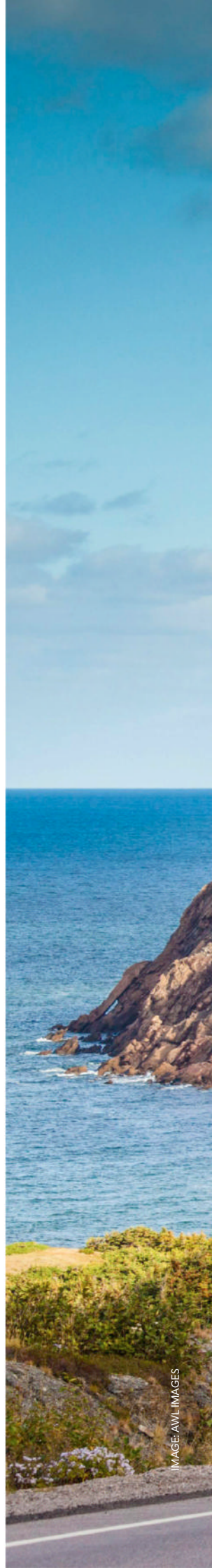


IMAGE: AWL IMAGES









### ITINERARY ONE

1. Vancouver
2. Whistler
3. Nanaimo
4. Cathedral Grove
5. Pacific Rim National Park Reserve
6. Tofino

## ITINERARY ONE BRITISH COLUMBIA

**Start:** Vancouver • **Finish:** Tofino • **Distance:** 410 miles • **Time:** 7 to 10 days

The great outdoors? Make that the greatest. British Columbia, on the west coast of Canada, has all the ingredients to set any wilderness-lover's pulse racing, from driftwood-strewn beaches to vast forests of evergreen giants, under whose canopies you'll experience the hush and reverence of a cathedral. It's here that some of planet Earth's most charismatic creatures roam: galumphing grizzlies, skittish black bears, cougars and even elusive coastal wolves, which pick their way between glacier-fed inlets to feast on the Pacific's larder.

To get into the thick of it you must first pass through Vancouver, the province's largest city — and surely a contender for the most scenic on the planet, above which floatplanes circle like honeybees over a hive. Amid the totem poles and skyscrapers in and around Stanley Park is one of Canada's most exciting food scenes, known for innovative fine dining and hyper-local dishes. You can budget a week to take in the city and west coast of Vancouver Island, but it's worth tacking on a few days to add one of the country's most scenic routes to the itinerary: the aptly named Sea to Sky Highway, which winds up to the mountain resort of Whistler. After a ferry hop across the Strait of Georgia, island life awaits, with the soaring cedars of Cathedral Grove, windswept beaches and boardwalked trails of Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, and pretty Tofino, the laid-back surfer town few ever want to leave.

### HIGHLIGHTS

#### VANCOUVER

Vancouver sits in all its glassy glory between peaks and sea, with the old-growth forests of Stanley Park at its heart. Search for its nine Indigenous totem poles, then the choice is yours: seek out the new constellation of Michelin stars or slip south in search of spicy wontons on the Richmond Dumpling Trail. [vancouver.ca](http://vancouver.ca)

#### WHISTLER

The Sea to Sky Highway climbs up from Vancouver with rock walls on one side, the Pacific on the other and nothing ahead but sky. Make for Whistler, home to North America's biggest ski resort and a hiking hotspot, and visit the Whistler Train Wreck, which has turned the site of a rail accident into a graffiti venue. Time your trip back into town with dusk for the best chance of spotting black bears.

#### NANAIMO

The rest of the trip is on Vancouver Island, which can be reached via a 30-mile ferry crossing from the mainland to the town of Nanaimo. Stick around to try a classic Canadian treat, the Nanaimo bar (coconut crumbs, custard icing and chocolate ganache). It was invented here, and there's even a trail to tick off all varieties in town. [nanaimo.ca](http://nanaimo.ca)

#### CATHEDRAL GROVE

En route to the coast, the highway runs through MacMillan Provincial Park. Fringing both sides of the road is one of the world's few easily accessible stands of old-growth temperate rainforest, where you can stroll along fern-lined trails between mammoth trunks and branches draped with lichen. [bcparks.ca](http://bcparks.ca)

#### PACIFIC RIM NATIONAL PARK RESERVE

Head on and through Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, a protected swathe of evergreens protruding on rocky fingers into the Pacific. Wander by Long Beach, best known for surfing and storm-watching, or head into the forest tracing the pawprints of coastal wolves.

#### TOFINO

A town of First Nations art galleries and surf shacks at what feels like the edge of the world, Tofino is as chilled as it is picturesque. End the journey at Long Beach Lodge Resort, where cottages peek out from spruce trees a few steps from the coast. [longbeachlodgeresort.com](http://longbeachlodgeresort.com)

**GEORGIA STEPHENS**

**HOW TO DO IT:** North America Travel Service offers a 14-night British Columbia Explorer trip from £3,416 per person including flights, car rental and accommodation on a room-only basis. Based on two adults travelling in May 2024. [northamericatravelservice.co.uk](http://northamericatravelservice.co.uk)



Q&amp;A

**Tyson Atleo, hereditary  
representative of the  
Ahousaht Nation**



**WHAT RELATIONSHIP DOES  
THE AHOUSAHT NATION  
HAVE WITH THE NATURE OF  
BRITISH COLUMBIA?**

Our home territories cover a majority of what people know as Clayoquot Sound on Vancouver Island, a coastal old-growth rainforest just offshore from Tofino. These areas are full of life, and they give us life: we depend on them for our economic, social and cultural wellbeing. But we're a community that's suffered alongside other Indigenous peoples from economic marginalisation, too. It's our mission as hereditary chiefs to retake our place as stewards of our land.

**HOW ARE YOU PURSUING  
THIS MISSION?**

Ahous Adventures is a new eco- and cultural tour company wholly owned by the Ahousaht Nation — the only one in the Tofino area. We offer a number of wildlife tours; depending on the weather and tides, visitors can see bears or sea lions, and the luckiest spend time with whales. But the premiere tour is Hot Springs Cove, cascading hot spring pools within our territory.

**WHY SHOULD VISITORS BOOK  
INDIGENOUS-LED TOURS?**

To experience a place through the eyes of those who are deeply connected to it, and to contribute to 'reconciliation' — empowering our people to retake their rightful place. With Indigenous operators, revenues often go back into the stewardship of the region, too, meaning you're contributing to protecting the places you love to visit. [ahousadventures.com](https://ahousadventures.com)

From top: The Lions Gate Bridge in Vancouver; totem poles in the city's Capilano Suspension Bridge Park  
Previous pages: The Cabot Trail on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia





## ITINERARY TWO

1. Whitehorse
2. Dawson City
3. Dempster Highway
4. Eagle Plains
5. Latitude 66° 33' Arctic Circle



## ITINERARY TWO YUKON

**Start:** Whitehorse • **Finish:** Latitude 66° 33' Arctic Circle  
**Distance:** 605 miles • **Time:** 7 to 10 days

There's nowhere like the Yukon for feeling like a pioneer-era explorer. Reaching above the Arctic Circle and dotted with gold rush towns, glacier-topped mountains and highways through boreal wilderness, this northerly territory is over three times the size of England, populated with far more creatures of fur and fin than people.

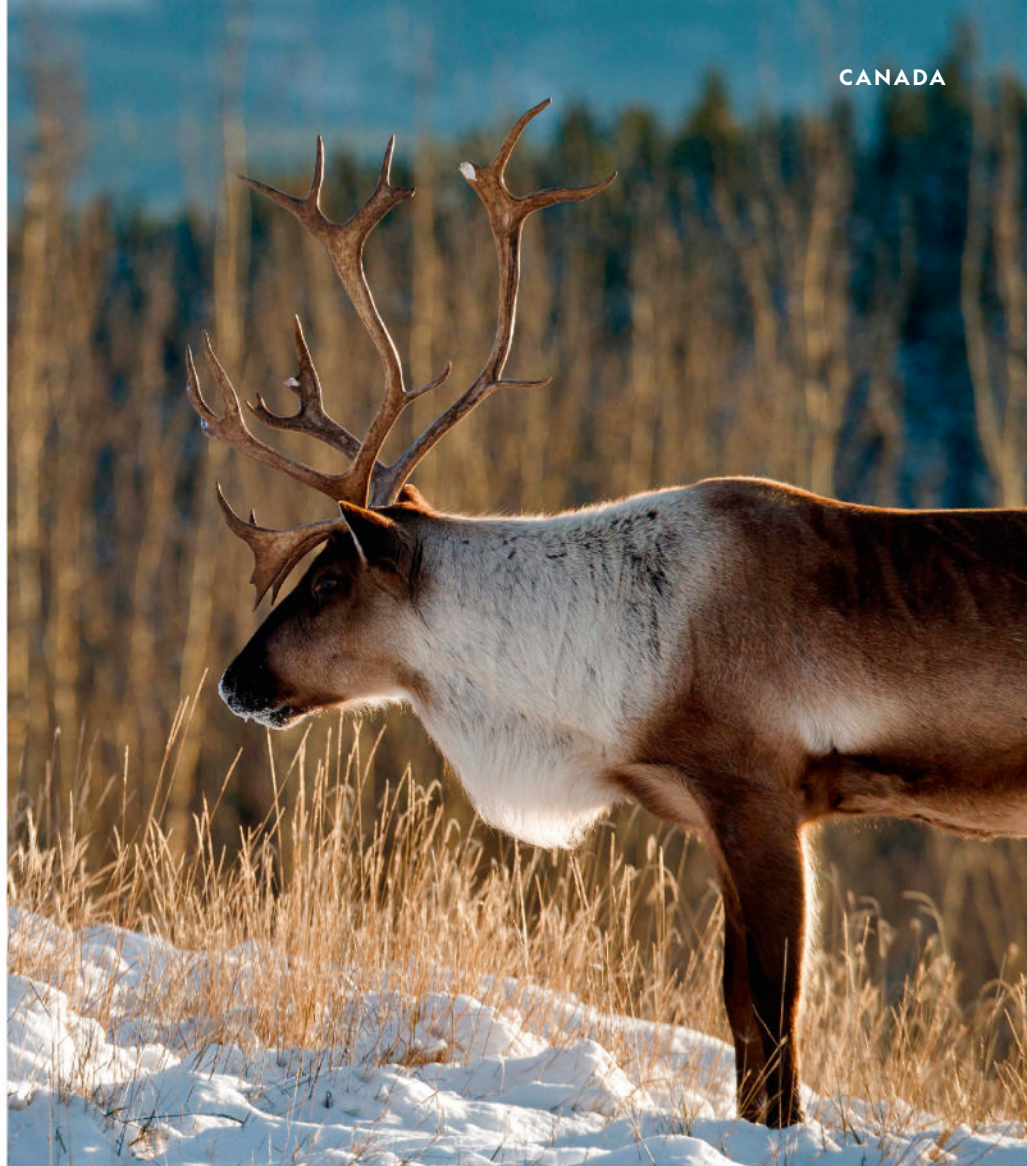
Start in Whitehorse, the local capital city and travel hub, where the great Alaska and Klondike Highways meet. Then, it's on to Dawson City, rich in gold rush history, and up the Dempster Highway — Canada's only all-season public access road to the Arctic Circle — before tracing your route back to the start. Even allowing seven to 10 days for this itinerary, drives between major stops can take up to six hours, so plan ahead to access garages, shops and service suppliers in the larger towns and cities. On the plus side, there will be plenty of spectacular places to stretch your legs. The looped hiking trails at Five Finger Rapids between Whitehorse and Dawson, for example, take in mountaintop panoramas with the chance to kayak and canoe.

And if all that's not enough, Haines Junction, just under two hours west of Whitehorse, is a great addition to either end of this itinerary. Here, short flightseeing trips take you over the world's largest non-polar ice fields: the glaciers of Kluane National Park.





Midnight Dome lookout  
above Dawson City, Yukon  
Right: A woodland caribou  
in the Yukon Wildlife Preserve



## HIGHLIGHTS

### WHITEHORSE

The 1890s encampment on the Yukon River's White Horse Rapids has grown into the Yukon's lively capital. Midnight Sun Coffee Roasters has artisan brews and bike hire, perfect for freewheeling the Waterfront Trail spanning the city. Next, explore the *SS Klondike*, a 19th-century boat-cum-museum revealing the scale of the region's gold rush, and enjoy the wild game menu at Klondike Rib & Salmon, which is housed in the city's oldest operating building. Nearby, Yukon Wildlife Preserve, Emerald Lake, Miles Canyon and Takhini Hot Springs offer further action and adventure. [midnightsuncoffeeroasters.com](http://midnightsuncoffeeroasters.com) [klondikerib.com](http://klondikerib.com) [yukonwildlife.ca](http://yukonwildlife.ca)

### DAWSON CITY

Make sure you have a full tank of petrol: it's around a six-hour drive to the next stop. You can top up on food an hour in at Braeburn Lodge, famed for its delicious, dinner-plate-sized cinnamon buns. Your destination, the atmospheric frontier town of Dawson City, has welcomed both dignitaries and the desperate over the centuries, including pioneer-era author Jack London, whose wood cabin is now a museum. Take in this national historic site's

old theatres, clapboard houses and saloon bars on a walking tour. A must-see is the Sourdough Saloon, located in The Downtown hotel, which serves the infamous Sourtie Cocktail (a strong alcohol of your choice, with a preserved human toe in it). Just beyond town, the Klondike fields are where Canada's gold rush began in 1896. Try gold-panning at Discovery Claim National Historic Site and get a view of it all from Midnight Dome lookout; during the colder months, the panorama is often lit by the Aurora Borealis. [facebook.com/gianormousfood](https://facebook.com/gianormousfood) [jacklondonmuseum.ca](http://jacklondonmuseum.ca) [coasthotels.com](http://coasthotels.com)

### DEMPSTER HIGHWAY

Wind your way along the Dempster Highway through remote tundra towards the dramatic wilderness of Tombstone Territorial Park, about an hour north of the Dempster Corner turnoff. Named for its craggy granite peak, the park is populated by wind-carved mountains and scenic viewpoints like North Fork Pass and Two Moose Lake. Numerous trails crisscross this 'Patagonia of the North'.

### EAGLE PLAINS

The road winds along the Ogilvie River Valley then climbs to the Eagle Plains plateau for spectacular views of the region. This is more

or less halfway along the Dempster Highway, before it heads into the Northwest Territories. Eagle Plains Hotel, the only one for many miles, is a hub for travellers to exchange tales from the road and refuel (try the double-decker Arctic burger). The town also has an RV park and campground. [eagleplainshotel.ca](http://eagleplainshotel.ca)

### LATITUDE 66° 33' ARCTIC CIRCLE

You've reached the end of your journey — and what an end it is. Just an hour's drive north of Eagle Plains is latitude 66° 33'N, better known as the Arctic Circle, marked by a roadside sign. Despite its icy connotations, it can surprise visitors: in midsummer, the sun circles the sky but never sets; in autumn (August to September), the Richardson Mountains are ablaze with fiery colours. For those keen to complete the route, it's six hours or more to the town of Inuvik, with the Arctic Ocean a further three hours' drive away. **SB**

**HOW TO DO IT:** My Canada Trips offers the 10-night Klondike Gold Rush Self Drive from £2,859 per person, including flights from London to Vancouver and Vancouver to Whitehorse, car hire, accommodation and a three-hour canoe trip in the Klondike Gold Rush region. Before setting off, ensure you have a spare tyre, a full tank of petrol and, ideally, an additional canister. [mycanadatrips.co.uk](http://mycanadatrips.co.uk) ➤



## EYEWITNESS

## ON THE COASTAL ROAD

**A road trip through southwest Nova Scotia takes in semi-mythic lighthouses, lobster boat fleets and lively harbour towns where daily life is still defined by the ebb and flow of the Atlantic. Words: Mike MacEacheran**

As the road hooks around the southern tip of St Margarets Bay, the silhouette of Peggy's Cove Lighthouse comes into view. The beacon surprises travellers on the coastal highway, inspiring simile with its appearances: it's a gigantic chess piece, a wine decanter, a jack-in-the-box popping up unexpectedly at road's end. To me, it shows up like a saltshaker on a table of rocks, overlooking the wrinkled cloth of blue sea beyond — a fitting beginning to a road trip through the seafood haven of Nova Scotia.

The southwest of the province is a place of pilgrimage for lighthouse enthusiasts, with many of the most beautiful examples on the Atlantic. Where the tide is sucked and squeezed between the peninsulas of Halifax and Yarmouth, lighthouses peer out in ivory white and maple red, still alive with light despite the passing of years. You'll see them when you pull over — markers for a drive along one of Canada's most meditative roads, from Peggy's Cove to Cape Sable Island, 160 miles down the coast.

I'm here in late spring and the commercial lobster-fishing season is finishing up along the eastern seaboard. Nova Scotians live in an alliance with the ocean — the province produces the sweetest, most in-demand crustaceans this side of the Atlantic — and lobster pounds (casual restaurants where lobsters are stored and sold live) are as common as creaky wharves and yawning bays. It's a nautical landscape alright. Shops sell oilskin smocks next to stalk-eyed cuddly toy shrimps and sea-themed tea towels. Mesh-framed lobster traps sit outside houses, looking to the uninitiated like horizontal postboxes.

The towns here pay tribute to Nova Scotia's seafaring history, a feeling that pervades UNESCO-listed Lunenburg, the coast's most determined time capsule. As June Davidson, of Lunenburg Walking Tours, tells me the next morning, it's a place made rich on salt-cured cod, and was known to the area's First Nations Mi'kmaq as Āseedĭk, 'the land of the clams'. Streetlights are adorned with metalwork swordfish, barb-chinned cod and red snapper, all hinged in illuminated procession. Diners at a seafood shack eat takeaway lobster on picnic tables, purring over its quick costume change from claw and tail to pinky-white flesh.

"The story of Lunenburg is one of transformation, of the European farmers who immigrated here and turned to the sea for survival," says June as we walk past old merchants' mansions, with mansard roofs, portal windows and scalloped trims. "It became the busiest and wealthiest port in Canada because the land couldn't sustain their needs." The immigrants, June explains, took to harvesting the sea's abundant natural larder, the result of rich fishing grounds and offshore banks between here and the region of Labrador, to the north.

It's a hard story to picture now. Schooner captains have reinvented themselves, slipping anchor for sunset cruises, and only 20 ocean-going vessels remain. Taking pride of place among them in the harbour is the *Nellie Row*, with the first all-female crew in Canada. Later, I taste the fruits of their labour at Grand Banker, a quarterdeck of a seafood pub. I try a Lunenburg lobster burger, topped with an avalanche of claw meat and harpooned with a scallop.

About 100 miles farther along the coast past slapping sea and shell-cut beaches, Barrington, not far from Cape Sable Island, is the self-styled 'world lobster capital', home to a thriving fishing industry. Visitors remain a relative novelty this far south in Nova Scotia, a place of rusting boats and clapboard cabins. Every old sea dog seems to know each other, and arriving feels like walking into a Popeye the Sailor Man vignette.

The town is home to the Old Court House, a museum of salty artefacts, including an exhibit where you can learn the art of the lobstermen by ringing a plastic crustacean with a spring-loaded rubber banding gun. "Careful with those pincers, or it'll snap your finger like a pencil," wisecracks Samantha Brannen, manager of the Barrington Museum Complex, who acts as my guide.

Tradition is being celebrated in other ways at the museum and afterwards Samantha takes a seat at a vintage hand loom. She presses down the treadles, teaching me to read the banded cloth being woven at her fingertips: scarlet red celebrates lobster; deep blue expresses the moods of the ocean; mustard yellow is in memory of those lost at sea. "Put these colours together, and it's not simply a neat synthesis," she says, introducing the criss-crossed Cape Sable Island fabric. "It's an ode to the province's Scottish roots, honouring our maritime heritage — as well as one of the world's newest tartans."

On a final drive south across Barrington Passage to Clark's Harbour on Cape Sable Island, I find more maritime history: MacMullen Oil Skin Factory, Captain Kat's Lobster Shack, Clam Point and The Salt Banker, the latter serving a creamed lobster on toast. The road's end leads to a beach muddled with driftwood and a view across Hawk Inlet to the southernmost point of Nova Scotia. I squint in the fading light to see Cape Sable Lighthouse, this one like an upended ice cream cone. A dessert, I chuckle to myself — an appropriate farewell.

**HOW TO DO IT:** Frontier Canada offers a 14-night Lighthouses and Hidden Treasures of Nova Scotia self-drive tour from £2,985 per person, based on two sharing. Includes return flights with Air Canada from Heathrow, accommodation and car hire. [frontier-canada.co.uk](https://frontier-canada.co.uk)

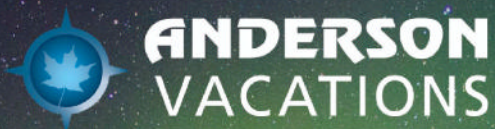
Clockwise from top: The fishing village of Peggy's Cove south of Halifax; the lighthouse in Peggy's Cove; a lobster fresh from the sea off the coast of Nova Scotia

IMAGES: GETTY; ALAMY









# EXPLORE CANADA'S NORTHERN WONDERS

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**Whitehorse**

Photo Credit: Yukon Gov't/Mather



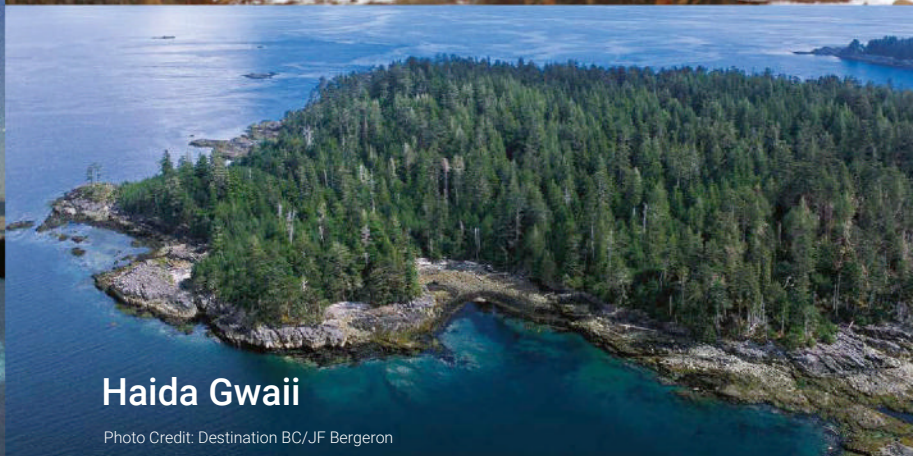
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A timber wolf, a species that can be spotted across the eastern regions of Canada

## CANADIAN WILDLIFE: A SPOTTER'S GUIDE

### BEARS

There are four types of bear in Canada. Grizzly bears are seen most often in British Columbia's Great Bear Rainforest, while black bears, the grizzly's more timid cousin, are spread more widely across the country. Polar bears are witnessed in the greatest numbers between October and November in Churchill, Manitoba. Finally, spirit bears — black bears with a recessive gene that turns their fur creamy white — can only be found in British Columbia, where they're considered sacred by local First Nations people. Bear-viewing in Canada often comes down to luck, but these animals are usually most active around dawn and dusk, on the sides of rivers and roads. Time your visit with the salmon run in autumn and book onto a guided tour.

### WOLVES

Wolves can be found in less-populated areas across Canada, from Labrador and British Columbia up to the Yukon and Northwest Territories. They're secretive and you're unlikely to spot one — the most you might see are their pawprints, which are around the size of an outstretched human hand. To be in with the best chance, head to Manitoba's Kaska Coast or BC's Pacific Rim National Park Reserve, where coastal wolves have become adept at fishing.

### BALD EAGLES

A white dot in a sea of evergreens is your first clue to the whereabouts of North America's most beloved bird. Then, you might spot that curved, yellow beak and the brown overcoat ending in a sweep of white feathers. Bald eagles can be found right across Canada, most frequently along the coast, and are so common that locals are largely unfazed by their sight.

### WHALES

You can spot more than 30 whale species in Canada, from belugas in Manitoba and orcas in British Columbia to narwhals in the far Arctic reaches of Nunavut. Humpbacks, minke and greys are seen along the west coast, while the east around Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Quebec is home to pilot, fin and sperm whales, and even big blues. The best time for whale-watching might vary depending on the destination, but it's typically May to October.

### MOOSE

Despite their enormous size, moose are surprisingly stealthy, and it's possible to drive right past them without ever knowing they are there. They're most often seen in low-lying wetlands beside rivers; look for them in Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario. **GS**



### THE TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAY In numbers

# 4,645 MILES

The total length of the Trans-Canada Highway (TCH) network, the second-longest national highway in the world after Australia's Highway 1

# 9

The number of Canadian provinces crossed by the highway's main route as it runs from Victoria, British Columbia to St John's, Newfoundland and Labrador

# 1962

The year the highway was officially opened following over a decade of work, though some sections remained uncompleted until 1971

# 1,627M

The altitude of the highway's highest point, the mile-high Kicking Horse Pass in the Canadian Rockies

# 8 MILES

The length of Confederation Bridge, the world's longest bridge over ice-covered waters, which carries part of the TCH from Prince Edward Island to the mainland

# 44

The number of wildlife corridors, including both bridges and overpasses, constructed to allow animals to safely traverse the highway in Banff National Park

# 2012

The year the TCH became the world's longest electric-vehicle-ready highway, after electric charging stations were installed along its main route. **AL**





Driving the Icefields Parkway through the Canadian Rockies in Jasper National Park

## A practical guide to road-tripping in Canada

### What car should I choose?

Canada's roads are generally well maintained and easy to navigate, so it's really just a matter of personal preference. That said, if you're planning on going somewhere remote or known for unpredictable weather conditions, it may be worth opting for a 4WD. If you're driving in winter on remote roads such as the Dempster Highway in the Yukon, you should consider hiring a car that comes with winter tyres and snow chains. Some cars in cold regions come with internal heating elements for the engine, which will prevent it from freezing in extreme temperatures; there will usually be an external socket when parking for you to plug this into. Most car hire operators will be able to provide you with a satellite navigation system for a fee.

### Do I need a special driving licence?


You can hire a car using a full UK driver's licence, though some companies may require you to also carry an International Driving Permit, so it's worth checking ahead before you travel. Take out the best insurance to cover you in case of an accident.

### Any rules of the road I should know?

Traffic lights often catch international travellers out. Generally, it's acceptable to turn

right on a red light after a stop if it's safe to do so, unless otherwise indicated. There are also two types of green light: a solid green means the same as it does in the UK; a flashing one means you have the right of way to turn left. Four-way junctions are also fairly common and the rule there is the first to stop is the first to go. If you arrive at the same time as another vehicle, the person on the right has the right of way, though it's always good to visually confirm with the other driver before moving.

### How can I keep safe?

Always plan a realistic route: Canada is the world's second-largest country, and stops between towns and petrol stations can be surprisingly few. You should always travel with enough food and water to tide you over if you get stuck, and check you have enough petrol before a long drive, particularly in more remote areas. Once on the road, one of the main hazards is wildlife, especially at night — elk, deer, moose and bighorn sheep, as well as bears and wolves, which occasionally cross the road without much warning. Get a satellite phone to call for help if you get stranded in an area with limited phone reception. Ice can be difficult to see on the road and even the best drivers can slip and get stuck in a snow drift. **GS** 

### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Air Canada flies direct from London to Vancouver and Halifax, and with one stop to Whitehorse. [aircanada.com](https://aircanada.com)

**Average flight time:** 7h to Halifax; 9.45h to Vancouver; 16h to Whitehorse. Car rental is available from airports, while RV hire can be booked with specialist companies. For information on weather and road conditions, visit [theweathernetwork.com](https://theweathernetwork.com). For advice on motorhome rental in Canada, visit [gorving.ca](https://gorving.ca)

### WHEN TO GO

In the northern reaches, temperatures can drop as low as -20C to -40C in winter. From April to May, bears wake up from hibernation, so pay attention if you're hiking. July and August are generally hot across the country, with averages of around 26C in Toronto and 22C in Calgary. Autumn is great for wildlife with the salmon run.

### MORE INFO

[canada.ca](https://canada.ca)

### HOW TO DO IT

Discover the World offers self-drive trips to British Columbia, the Yukon and Nova Scotia. Packages are based on two sharing and include accommodation, car rental and some activities. [discover-the-world.com](https://discover-the-world.com)





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# BERLIN

Following decades of turmoil during the 20th century, the German capital blazes with colour and invention, busy forging monuments to its new artistic movement from the ruins of its past

WORDS: SEAN NEWSOM. PHOTOGRAPHS: VERENA BRUENING

If you're looking for a symbol of Berlin's 20th-century history, you could do a lot worse than the Teufelsberg. Rising out of the Grunewald forest, at the western edge of the city, this 375ft hill is made almost entirely out of the wreckage of the Second World War. Bricks mainly, but also broken lintels, smashed tiles and pock-marked stone: in the end, 26 million cubic metres of the stuff, cleared from Berlin's streets, was dumped here over the half-finished shell of a military academy. The Nazis had been building it when, in 1945, Stalin's tanks rolled in.

Then, the British and Americans placed a listening post on top, crowned with a handful of antennas encased in domes like great, white golf balls. Once staffed by 1,500 Cold War spies, it didn't just monitor Communist conversations; West German journalists suspected their telephone calls were being bugged, too. No wonder they called it the Teufelsberg — *teufel* is German for 'devil'.

Now, the scene is rather different. The Allies shipped out in 1991, and before anyone could agree what to do with the site, locals were cutting holes in its perimeter fence and wriggling through. Some just wanted to see what all the fuss had been about; others brought cans of spray paint.

"How could it have been otherwise?" says Berlin artist and Teufelsberg guide Richard Rabensaat, when he takes me up there one midweek morning. "It was a wonderful, adventurous place, full of secrets," he says. "And you could paint there without fear of being stopped by the police."

Pretty soon, the Teufelsberg became an unofficial open-air gallery of street art — and that status was officially confirmed in 2014. When it first opened, full time, to the public, 5,000 people a day were crowding in.

It's much quieter now, and at first the overwhelming impression is of dilapidation. Only Mother Nature seems purposeful, coiling ivy around drainpipes and sending silver birches shimmering through gaps in the tarmac.

The Teufelsberg's vaunted artwork seems secondary to the sense of decay. Then we round a corner, and lay eyes on the back of the building.

What a sight greets me there. This is where its biggest walls are — and across them three different artists have let loose. One of the works is pure Roy Lichtenstein: a pop art melodrama of comic-book emotions. Another is an album-cover-worthy dreamscape of purples, blues and browns. But it's the largest of the three — painted by Berlin street artist Akut in 2022 — that really holds your gaze.

Here, a black-haired woman, five storeys high, squats against a dark and troubled sky. The mottled paintwork of her skinny arms contrasts delicately with the faultless sheen of her boxing gloves, and in spite of her obvious frailty her look is one of pure defiance. "When David turned into Goliath", the caption reads, alongside the names of a galaxy of era-defining high-achievers — all of them female. Even the resurgent vegetation looks wilted beside the strength of its conviction. And it's clear that Berlin still blazes with colour and invention.

For years, I've been reading about how — after its great dividing wall came down — Berlin was flooded with artists, nightclubbers and refugees. The politicians may have been talking about how best to rebuild their broken capital, but this twentysomething horde loved its neglect and dirt-cheap rents — and for nearly two decades, they defined the remaking of the city just as powerfully as the refurbished Reichstag. Problem is, over 30 years have passed since reunification. Would the grassroots renaissance that followed now be a spent force?

I needn't have worried. It's not just the Teufelsberg that's creative. Here, street art is so assertive and ubiquitous that it's become mainstream. Take Fotografiska, for example. Newly opened in the central district of Mitte, it's the Berlin branch of a global chain of photography galleries and at







## INSIDER TIPS

Forget currywurst — Berlin's best street food is a €5 (£4.30) *gözleme* flatbread, served in Neukölln's Turkish market on Tuesdays and Fridays. Freshly cooked on-site, they're best stuffed with spinach and cheese, doused in a garlic and lemon aioli sauce.

Fun, fleeting and inclusive, an evening at a performance art event in Berlin is great way to connect with its art scene — and its artists. For a handy guide to what's coming next, see [visitberlin.de](https://visitberlin.de)

Buying a Berlin Card or a one-day travel card? Most options cover just the central zones A and B. If you're using it to reach Berlin Brandenburg Airport as well, you'll need it to cover zone C too.

If you're struggling to fit all the must-see art museums into your itinerary, remember that on Thursdays several are open until 8pm. These include the Hamburger Bahnhof (for contemporary works) and the Neue Nationalgalerie of 20th-century art, whose new presentation of post-war art was unveiled in November.

Clockwise from top: The Teufelsberg; nightlife spot Paolo Pinkel; banana cake at Café Babette, near Weserstrasse, an area full of restaurants and bars. Previous pages: Berlin's skyline

first it seems almost too sleek for Berlin. Until, that is, you discover its stairwell and landings.

From top to bottom, they're awash with graffiti — a remnant from the days when the building was full of workshops and studios. It was a smart move to keep it. You pace the galleries in a contemplative mood, looking at the 'finished' works on the walls. Then, you head downstairs and you're surrounded by manic, joyful energy, layered up endlessly as every new tagger made their mark and obliterated what came before. It feels like you've wandered into someone's brain to watch its synapses endlessly firing.

Meanwhile, across inner suburbs such as Neukölln, to the south, graffiti still clammers up every bare wall. I take it all in with Tobi Allers, a historian, part-time DJ and cultural tour guide, who explains just how deep the roots of Berlin's renaissance run.

"Long before the Wall came down, West Berlin was a counter-cultural hub," he tells me — thanks to all the draft-dodgers who came here. "They think maybe 50,000 men avoided their national service in districts like this." He also makes it clear just how low rents could be in the 1990s and early 2000s: you could work just five or six shifts a month in a bar and cover your basic living costs.

Life is more expensive now. These days, he says, the talk among Tobi's generation is of rising rents and the squeeze gentrification is putting on the creative community. But that hasn't stopped younger artists from piling in, as I discover when I attend a performance art event in what is arguably one of Neukölln's loveliest streets, Weserstrasse.

At its northwestern end, close to fashionable Kreuzberg, this long, tree-lined street buzzes with bars and restaurants. Along the roads that bisect it you can buy vintage vinyl, designer clothes and dusty antiques. But it's peppered with grassroots art galleries too, such as Backhaus Projects at Westerstrasse 168. It's here that I see Yi Ten Lai Fernández performing her work *Mama y Papa* as part of the group exhibition, *Objects of Care*.

Elliot Waples is there, too. Fresh in from America, he's a young and inventive performance artist who left Brooklyn on

account of its eye-watering prices. For him, Berlin is now the obvious place to be. Not just because it's still — relatively — cheap, but also thanks to its passion for his favourite art form.

"It's the only city I know where performance art is showcased at every level of the art scene," he says. Together with about 30 other onlookers we sit down to watch Yi Ten Lai pour water from an elegant oriental teapot into some exquisite cups, repeatedly. I can't help but feel somehow soothed and nurtured by her careful ritual. We all sit there in silence for several minutes afterwards, until the mood of the room suddenly lifts. Everyone gets to their feet and resumes their conversations.

In a city that's changed so often and so profoundly, the fleeting nature of that moment seems entirely appropriate. It's also a real icebreaker. As we chatter on into the evening I wonder if, as a traveller, I've ever felt quite so connected, so quickly, to a city.

But nothing I see — not even Yi Ten Lai's performance — can match the impact of the Teufelsberg, and I find my mind drifting back to my morning with Richard, even days later. In part, that's down to the art, but it's also because of the view.

Berlin is, for the most part, a flat, low-rise city. Look east, and even on a 375ft pile of rubble, you're high enough to see right across the metropolis — which is sleek, resurgent and peppered with ever-more-expensive buildings. Look the other way, and pretty much all you can see are trees. Not just the 7,000 acres of the Grunewald: the lie of the land westwards is such that forests appear to reach out to every inch of the horizon. It's as if, while Berlin has been busy rebuilding, Mother Nature has quietly been amassing her troops. In this era of accelerating climate change, it does seem a perfectly fair response.

Meanwhile here, in the middle, stands this ragged and weatherbeaten symbol of Berlin's wrong turns and restarts. Its concrete is crumbling. Its tattered geodesic domes flap in the wind and, one day, the time will no doubt come to pull the whole thing down and move on. How brilliant, then, that on the cusp of whatever's coming next, it's been turned into a fierce and joyful palace of paint.







**Street life** Berlin is one of Europe's greenest cities. About 30% of it is publicly accessible green space, compared to 20% in London, and it's also home to around 430,000 street trees — Paris has 110,000 in comparison





Vegetable ravioli  
served with chestnut  
cream at Café Botanico  
Left: Sitting on the  
banks of the river Spree  
at Holzmarkt





**Dennis Pahl is an artist and co-founder of Neukölln fashion store Kolla.Berlin**

**HOW HAS NEUKÖLLN CHANGED OVER TIME?**

Since 2008, the party scene has grown and the crowd is more international. The streets are much better lit, too. The big wave of artists creating their spaces in the district seems to be over, but the ones who succeeded in establishing themselves are still around and thriving.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY FAVOURITE SHOPS?**

Zauberking Berlin is my favourite for fun magic tricks and costumes, and Save the Cake for all kinds of hats. [zauberkoenig-berlin.de](http://zauberkoenig-berlin.de) [savethecake.de](http://savethecake.de)

**WHAT'S THE BEST NIGHT TO GO OUT ON WESERSTRASSE?**

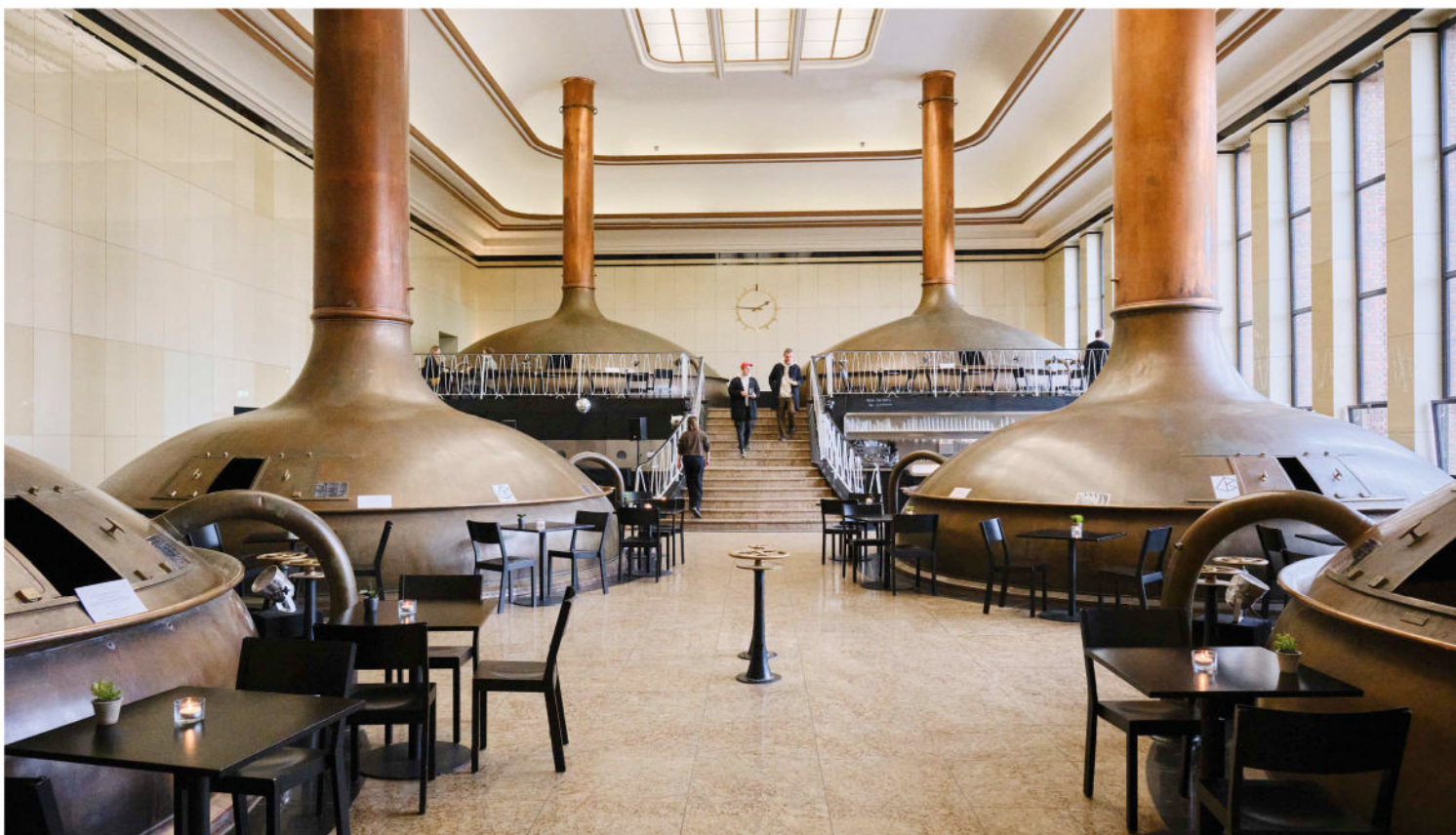
Fridays, for sure. I like to have a drink after work at Schilling and then go for cocktails at Tier. [schillingbar.de](http://schillingbar.de) [tier.bar](http://tier.bar)

**WHERE'S YOUR FAVOURITE PLACE TO SEE CONTEMPORARY ART IN BERLIN?**

For exhibitions, it has to be the Martin-Gropius-Bau, a venue in Kreuzberg. But sometimes I just go gallery-hopping along Auguststrasse and Sophienstrasse in Mitte. Every June, the art festival 48 Stunden Neukölln, which translates to '48 hours in Neukölln', takes place. It's very cool and worth seeing. [berlinerfestspiele.de](http://berlinerfestspiele.de)







## 14 HOURS IN

## Berlin

## 10AM

STAINED GLASS IN  
THE GEDÄCHTNISKIRCHE

Berlin's history takes concrete form at the Gedächtniskirche (Kaiser Wilhelm Church) on Kurfürstendamm. The original 19th-century structure was hammered by Allied bombs in 1943 and then partially rebuilt after the Second World War, with the wreck of the old central spire preserved in the middle. The modernist architecture is stern, uncompromising stuff — until you go inside the chapel. Set into its honeycomb walls are hundreds of panes of stained glass, glowing an ethereal blue. [gedaechtniskirche-berlin.de](http://gedaechtniskirche-berlin.de)

## 11AM

PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBITS  
AT THE C/O BERLIN GALLERY

Strong, smooth coffee awaits just 450m from the Gedächtniskirche, in the cafe at C/O Berlin. The former Amerika Haus cultural centre, with its elegant 1950s setting, is now better known as one of Berlin's best photography galleries — with a track record of socially engaged and intelligently curated exhibitions, as well as an art bookshop that's impossible to resist. [co-berlin.org](http://co-berlin.org)

## 1PM

## LUNCH AT NENI

Don't leave the area without first taking the lift to this 10th-floor restaurant on Budapester Strasse, next to the leafy Tiergarten park. Make sure you book ahead and insist on a table on the north side, so you can gaze in wonder over 520 acres of inner-city trees as you enjoy the likes of Korean fried chicken salad with peanuts and pickled pomegranate, and spicy caramelised aubergine with toasted sesame and Japanese rice (mains from €18.50/£16). You might also find yourself searching for Norman Foster's Reichstag dome on the horizon. [neniberlin.de](http://neniberlin.de)

## 2PM

## STREET ART AT URBAN NATION MUSEUM

This free gallery of contemporary art is just five minutes on the U2 underground line, and is funded by one of Berlin's largest municipal housing associations, Gewobag. Through a series of scholarships and community projects, Gewobag also encourages murals on its own apartment blocks. This means you can feast on vivid paintings inside the gallery, then follow with a side-order of street art in Bülowstrasse immediately outside. [urban-nation.com](http://urban-nation.com)

Clockwise from top left:  
The Gedächtniskirche's  
stained glass windows;  
Café Babette, in the  
Kindl — Centre for  
Contemporary Art, sits  
in an old brewery; the  
Urban Nation gallery





Left: Stairs at the Urban Nation Museum by artist Ben Eine



#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Take the train from London St Pancras to Berlin Hauptbahnhof via Brussels and Cologne. [raileurope.com](https://www.raileurope.com)

**Average journey time:** 9h.

British Airways flies direct to Berlin Brandenburg from Heathrow and London City. EasyJet flies direct from several airports. [ba.com](https://www.ba.com) [easyjet.com](https://www.easyjet.com)

**Average flight time:** 2h.

While a single district can be explored on foot, you'll need public transport to travel widely. Buy a Berlin Card (from €25/£21 for two days) for unlimited S-Bahn, U-Bahn, tram and bus services. One-day travel cards from €9.90 (£8.50). [berlin-welcomecard.de](https://www.berlin-welcomecard.de) [bvg.de](https://www.bvg.de)

#### WHEN TO GO

Winter can be cold, with the average temperature as low as -2C in January. By May, things start to feel more upbeat, with blossom on the trees, though in July and August days can be hot – averaging around 25C. One of the best times is October, when the trees are in their full autumnal finery.

#### WHERE TO STAY

25Hours Bikini Berlin, Charlottenburg. From €135 (£116), B&B.

[25hours-hotels.com](https://www.25hours-hotels.com)

Arte Luise Kunsthof, Mitte. From €119 (£102), room only.

[luise-berlin.com](https://www.luise-berlin.com)

Oriana Hotel, Kreuzberg. From €157.60 (£135), room only. [oriania.berlin](https://www.oriania.berlin)

#### MORE INFO

[visitberlin.de](https://www.visitberlin.de)

#### HOW TO DO IT

Kirker has three nights at NH Collection Berlin Mitte Friedrichstrasse from £678 per person, B&B, including flights and transfers. [kirkerholidays.com](https://www.kirkerholidays.com)

Group tours of the Teufelsberg start from €15 (£13); Neukölln with Tobi Allers costs from €15 (£13). [teufelsberg-berlin.de](https://www.teufelsberg-berlin.de) [berlinkultour.de](https://www.berlinkultour.de)

### 3.30PM

#### A RIVERSIDE DRINK AT HOLZMARKT

Is the sun out? If it is, the next stop is Holzmarkt, a short walk from Ostbahnhof station. This hub of bars, businesses and restaurants is one of the few spots beside the river Spree where you can have a drink with the water lapping at your feet. Come for an unexpected city-centre combination of willow trees and peeping coots, stay for a spot of browsing. Rafiness und Tristesse upcycles olive oil cans into furniture, Die Backpfeife is a bakery serving cinnamon rolls, pretzels and sourdough sandwiches, Blackfisk is the place to consider a souvenir Berlin tattoo. [holzmarkt.com](https://www.holzmarkt.com)

### 4.30PM

#### SHOPPING IN NEUKÖLLN

You're heading to arty Neukölln for dinner, so why not check out its small, independent shops and boutiques first? Bürknerstrasse has several, such as Kolla.Berlin. Co-owned by painter Dennis Pahl, it specialises in soft, loose-necked sweaters and reversible hooded minidresses. Nearby, Scusi Vintage sells a selection of retro Italian clothing and Yes Studio has kitschy candles and stylish glassware. If you're here on Tuesday or Saturday you can also spoil your appetite by snacking your way along the Turkish market on Maybachufer street, which runs until 6.30pm. [visitberlin.de](https://www.visitberlin.de)

### 7.30PM

#### DINNER AT JAJA WEIN

Weserstrasse is Neukölln's friendly and understated nightlife hub, and well worth a look. But first, take a detour to welcoming and unpretentious Jaja Wein nearby. Here, chef and former artist Hannes Broecker serves a short menu of vegetable-heavy dishes using local ingredients. Textures and techniques are spot-on in dishes such as celeriac tortellini with black trumpet mushrooms and an unctuous egg-yolk sauce. Alternatively, try Café Botanico on nearby Richardstrasse, a German-Italian haunt that grows its own produce for its irresistibly fresh pasta dishes. [jajawein.de](https://www.jajawein.de) [cafe-botanico.de](https://www.cafe-botanico.de)

### 10PM

#### DRINKS AT PAOLO PINKEL

Jaja Wein's irresistible list of natural wines is highly likely to stretch your dinner later into the night than you originally intended, but if you have the energy and feel like going on afterwards, Paolo Pinkel is your best bet, only 150m away. Sprawling along both Weichselstrasse and Karl-Marx-Strasse, it's an unpretentious, mood-lit and well-mannered nightlife hub comprising three kitchens, a buzzing cocktail bar and a small dance floor, which stays open at the weekends until 5am. You'll probably find yourself dancing there after a spicy Thai cocktail or two. [paolopinkel.berlin](https://www.paolopinkel.berlin)





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CITY LIFE

# DUBAI

In the shadow of the world's tallest skyscrapers, centuries-old neighbourhoods and intimate cultural experiences can be found in this Emirati city — reminding visitors of its humbler roots

WORDS: HAZEL PLUSH. PHOTOGRAPHS: KATARINA PREMFORS







In a place of superlatives — highest, biggest, priciest — why settle for simple pleasures? Dubai has long been seen as a fun-loving, unabashedly ambitious city, often overshadowing the UAE's more serious-minded capital of Abu Dhabi. It's a place where you can swim above clouds in 360-degree infinity pools or quaff cocktails in billowing beach cabanas, and it's this 'City of Gold' most travellers come for. A winter sun utopia, it dazzles with opulence and novelty, from the soaring architecture and dancing fountains of Downtown to Jumeirah's luxury hotels and the Marina's million-pound yachts.

It may seem like it all rose fully formed, mirage-like, from the surrounding dunes; indeed, it only took a generation for this improbable desert metropolis to spring from the ground after the 1960s — a feat fuelled by new oil-funded wealth. But the city's roots stretch deeper, and to far humbler beginnings.

Sipping chai from a street vendor's vat and inhaling spices in a warren of souks: these are the joys of 'Old Dubai', in its northernmost reaches. In the 16th century, this once impoverished port became a pearl-trading hub and attracted a global diaspora around its Creek, a natural harbour splicing the disticts of Deira and Bur Dubai. Merchants from across the Middle East and beyond brought recipes and traditions to this medley of markets and mosques. Today, the scent of slow-roasted lamb still wafts from Afghani restaurants, sewing machines thrum in Pakistani tailor shops and heaps of Omani frankincense are swapped for a few dirhams — the deal sealed with a *shukran*, the Arabic for 'thank you'.

Between the old and new is a city that's maturing. There's a cultural centre highlighting the little-known warmth of the Emirati way of life, while intimate supper clubs, independent art galleries and homely wellness studios provide an antidote to the palatial luxury. In the alleyways of Al Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood, part of Bur Dubai, the ancient coral and sandalwood mansions of minted pearl traders have been converted into courtyard cafes, artisanal shops and delightfully niche museums specialising in coins, coffee and calligraphy.

Beyond Al Fahidi's minarets and wind towers — chimney-like structures used for ventilation — you might spy a distant flash: the silver spire of the world's tallest tower, the Burj Khalifa, just a 20-minute taxi ride southwards. That's Dubai's real kick. It still chases those superlatives, but it treasures the small gems, too, and is all the richer for it.







## SEE & DO

**TRADITIONAL SOUKS:** Haggle in Bur Dubai's Old Souk for hand-woven fabrics, raw silk and delicate laces, then head across the Creek for more perusing at Deira's neighbouring Spice and Gold Markets. Cross the waterway with an abra boat: it's the traditional way, and a one-way trip costs just 1 AED (£0.22). Carrying bags laden with Emirati dates and Iranian saffron, you'll feel like a merchant of old.

**FRYING PAN ADVENTURES:** Led by locals, these culinary walks of Old Dubai take in the kind of hole-in-the-wall restaurant and unassuming street food stalls you'd have a hard time finding alone. Try sizzling Indian *pakor*as (vegetable fritters), syrupy Palestinian *knafeh* pastries and other recipes from Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and beyond. For lighter bites, there's a new Old Dubai Quickie Snacking Tour. Kids go free May to September. [fryingpanadventures.com](https://fryingpanadventures.com)

**FREE BEACHES:** Dubai may be famous for its flashy beach clubs, but the city has free-to-access stretches of sand, too, each with its own unique appeal. Aptly named Kite Beach offers watersports including paddleboarding and kitesurfing, while The Beach, JBR is flanked by designer boutiques. For seafront jogging with skyscraper views, make for Palm West Beach, the promenade on the 'trunk' of the man-made, palm-shaped Palm Jumeirah island. [kitebeach.ae](https://kitebeach.ae) [thebeach.ae](https://thebeach.ae) [westbeach.ae](https://westbeach.ae)

**HIGH-END VIEWS:** Dubai is synonymous with sky-high attractions, from the Burj Khalifa's 1,483ft At the Top observation deck to Dubai Frame, where a glass-floored walkway takes in views of the city old and new. Or opt for Aura Skypool, the world's highest 360-degree infinity pool, which has swim sessions, yoga classes and boozy brunches suspended nearly 700ft above Palm Jumeirah. [burjkhalifa.ae](https://burjkhalifa.ae) [dubaiiframe.ae](https://dubaiiframe.ae) [auraskypool.com](https://auraskypool.com)

**HERO BOATS:** From yacht rentals to sunset cruises in heritage-style dhows, there are countless ways to enjoy the Persian Gulf. Half jet ski, half speedboat, these nippy two-seaters can reach up to 30m/h for a thrilling look at the Burj Al Arab and Palm Jumeirah. [heroboattours.com](https://heroboattours.com)

**PLATINUM HERITAGE:** Escape to the desert in an open-top Land Rover, ideal for spotting rare Arabian oryx amid an ochre ocean of dunes. An hour's drive from the city, Platinum Heritage's Bedouin camp offers a glimpse at life before Dubai's oil boom, with guided astronomy, henna painting and more. [platinum-heritage.com](https://platinum-heritage.com)

**SHEIKH MOHAMMED CENTRE FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING:** Located in Al Fahidi, this cultural centre encourages frank conversations with Emirati locals, where no topic is off limits. Book a traditional meal or workshop on Islamic crafts, part of a wider programme of guided tours and mosque visits. [cultures.ae](https://cultures.ae)



**BUY**

**ALSERKAL AVENUE:** Located in cool Al Quoz, this western district has over 70 art galleries, independent boutiques and artisanal studios set in former industrial warehouses. Visit Oo La Lab for bespoke perfumes, The Edit for one-off fashions or Iwan Maktabi for modern Islamic artworks. [alserkal.online](https://alserkal.online)

**LUCKY KIDS TRADING:** Don't be fooled by its name: this emporium in Al Fahidi sells great-value Asian and Middle Eastern clothes for all ages, from Indian lehenga skirts and batik-print Malaysian kaftans to Sri Lankan saris and more. Be sure to ask for a complimentary cup of chai while you browse.

**SOUK MADINAT JUMEIRAH:** Haggling is expected in most of Dubai's souks, but for a more laid-back experience with fixed prices this boutique market is a popular compromise. It's a modern take on an old-time bazaar, complete with stands and stalls, winding alleys and wood-framed walkways, and features jewellery, art and curio shops galore. [jumeirah.com](https://jumeirah.com)



Clockwise from left: The souk in the Al Seef district; Kite Beach in Jumeirah; Deira's Spice Souk  
Previous pages: An abra boat, traditionally used to ferry people across Dubai's Creek

**In 1989,** Al Fahidi was slated for demolition, but Britain's King Charles III — then Prince of Wales — implored Dubai's royal family to call off the plans; without his intervention, this quarter likely wouldn't exist





## DUBAI

### EAT

**£ ARABIAN TEA HOUSE:** Tables are arranged around a courtyard at this Al Fahidi institution, open since 1997. Rattan chairs and lace curtains set the scene for the traditional meal to come: cardamom-spiced *gahwa* coffee, biryani-style chicken *machboos* and plump shrimps still sizzling from the coals.

[arabianteahouse.com](http://arabianteahouse.com)

**££ SEVA:** Located a few blocks back from Jumeirah Public Beach, this wellness studio has a plant-based, health-minded garden restaurant with rustic wooden tables and leafy plants. Book a yoga or meditation class, then recharge with fruit-filled acai bowls or a coconut ceviche with mango and fresh lime.

[sevaexperience.com](http://sevaexperience.com)

**£££ BUBBALICIOUS BRUNCH:** Of all Dubai's brunches, this family-friendly buffet has got to be the most lavish. Held every Saturday at The Westin Dubai Mina Seyahi Beach Resort & Marina, it's an all-you-can-eat extravaganza of sushi, curry, mezze and more round-the-world dishes, with table-side entertainment and free-flowing bubbly.

[marriott.com](http://marriott.com)



### SLEEP

**£ ROVE DOWNTOWN:** Buck the trend for Downton's five-star opulence with the Rove, a budget-friendly option around a 10-minute-walk from Dubai Mall. The pared-back rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows, while the common areas for working or lounging pop with plenty of colour and design quirks. As well as a Burj Khalifa-facing swimming pool, there's a free shuttle bus to the beach.

[rovehotels.com](http://rovehotels.com)

**££ XVA ART HOTEL:** Set in the former home of one of Dubai's wealthiest families, this boutique hotel epitomises Al Fahidi's Old Arabia charm. It's centred around tree-shaded courtyards, where the cafe serves fattoush salads, *mujaddara* (rice, lentils and onions) and more vegetarian bites. Contemporary Middle Eastern art punctuates all spaces, from the on-site gallery to 15 bespoke guest rooms.

[xvahotel.com](http://xvahotel.com)

**£££ ONE&ONLY ONE ZA'ABEEL:** Shaped like a giant 'H', this self-styled 'vertical resort' is the most outlandish addition to Dubai's skyline in recent years. There's a three-storey wellness area, 12 dining options and the UAE's longest infinity pool, while guest rooms pay homage to the surrounding Za'abeel ('white sand') district with neutral tones and sand motifs.

[oneandonlyresorts.com](http://oneandonlyresorts.com)





Arabian Tea House, a traditional restaurant in Al Fahidi  
Left from top: tea being served  
at Arabian Tea House; visitors at  
Souk Madinat Jumeirah







Left: Dining with views of the city at the Cé La Vi's rooftop terrace



#### GETTING THERE & AROUND

Airlines including Emirates, British Airways, Royal Brunei and Virgin Atlantic fly direct between the UK and Dubai, with over 50 flights per week from Heathrow alone. Regional airports are well served by Emirates with direct routes from Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester and Newcastle.

[emirates.com](https://emirates.com) [ba.com](https://ba.com)

[flyroyalbrunei.com](https://flyroyalbrunei.com) [virginatlantic.com](https://virginatlantic.com)

**Average flight time:** 7h.

Some areas, such as the Marina and the Creek, are easy to walk around, but the wider city isn't pedestrian-friendly. Yet, Dubai has a relatively small sprawl: driving from one end to the other takes around 40 minutes. Taxis are good value and easy to hail, costing 1.97 AED (44p) per km, and services such as Uber and Careem are also available. The Metro system is even cheaper, from 3 AED (65p) per journey, and serves a linear route the length of the city, including Dubai International Airport.

[rta.ae](https://rta.ae)

#### WHEN TO GO

For winter sunshine, visit between November and February, when temperatures hover at 25C and chances of rain are extremely low. Prices are lower in spring (March and April) and autumn (September and October), but the mercury climbs to around 35C. During summer (late May to August), expect daily highs of 45C and drenching humidity, even at night.

#### MORE INFO

[visitdubai.com](https://visitdubai.com)

Pocket Rough Guide Dubai. £9.99

#### HOW TO DO IT

On the Beach offers seven nights at Al Seef Heritage Hotel, part of Hilton's Curio Collection, in a souk-view Heritage Room, from £807 per person, B&B, based on two sharing, including return flights from Heathrow. [onthebeach.co.uk](https://onthebeach.co.uk)

#### AFTER HOURS

**DUBAI OPERA:** This 2,000-seat opera house hosts some of the finest names in classical music, notably talents from across the Middle East — as well as concerts, plays and ballets thanks to a flexible floorplan. Come early for a tour of the dhow-shaped building, with backstage access to dressing and trap rooms. [dubaiopera.com](https://dubaiopera.com)

**CÉ LA VI:** Downtown's glittering towers seem close enough to touch from this roof terrace: up on the 54th floor of Address Sky View hotel, it's pure Dubai glamour. Sit at the Skybar, where the order of choice is a zesty-sour 'shiso margarita' (tequila, yuzu, agave and sumac). [celavi.com](https://celavi.com)

**SUNSET KAYAKING:** Watch as the city skyline becomes a silhouette against the pink sky on a sunset paddling excursion. Crystal Clear Watersports has glass-bottomed kayaks fitted with yellow neon lighting; as the skyscrapers' lights flicker to life, so do yours. [crystalclearwatersports.com](https://crystalclearwatersports.com)

#### LIKE A LOCAL

**SOCIAL MEALS:** Supper clubs in Dubai reflect the city's diaspora. Nicaraguan cuisine is served by candlelight at Girl and the Goose, while K'iin whips up a Mexican menu in an open kitchen. Or keep an eye out for Eye Heart Rabbit, a wandering Middle Eastern pop-up. [girlandthegoose.com](https://girlandthegoose.com) [kiin-supperclub.com](https://kiin-supperclub.com) [instagram.com/eyeheartrabbit](https://instagram.com/eyeheartrabbit)

**EVENING STROLLS:** Creek-side Al Seef is a new-build homage to ancient Arabia — a modern district with palm-thatched roofs and brass-studded doors. Its *sikkas* (alleyways) come alive at night, especially on Fridays, when locals socialise over mint lemonade. [alseef.ae](https://alseef.ae)

**DOWN TIME:** Hotels in Dubai offer seriously flashy outdoor fun. Emiratis in the know rely on discounted passes like Groupon to access these five-star facilities for the day; Fairmont the Palm, for example, has several pools, a white sand beach and a watersports centre. [groupon.ae](https://groupon.ae) [fairmont.com](https://fairmont.com) □



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# Taiwan

## Three cities to savour

Small yet spectacular, Taiwan is a melting pot of East Asian tastes and traditions. Explore them at their best on a journey through three lesser-visited cities. Words: Erin Hale

Taiwan, a series of small subtropical islands sat in the northwestern Pacific ocean, is a destination known for its natural beauty. These islands are also home to one of East Asia's most exciting culinary scenes, one that has been influenced by not only its lush landscapes but also its rich history. First inhabited by Austronesian-speaking Indigenous groups, Taiwan has acted as a cultural crossroads for over 500 years, having played host to Japanese, Dutch, Spanish and Chinese settlers.

The iconic capital, Taipei, is now the go-to destination for visitors to Taiwan, many of whom visit the region for a few days as part of a longer trip to East Asia. But for a better taste of Taiwan, it's worth staying a little longer to fully explore and appreciate its lesser-visited corners. An extensive rail and bus network make it easy to travel beyond the capital and discover some of Taiwan's most exciting culinary hotspots.

### TAINAN

One of the island's oldest cities, Tainan is a must-visit for those wanting to learn about Taiwanese history, with traditional shrines, temples and museums located around every corner. But it's also home to a dynamic, ever-evolving street food scene, with numerous night markets, such as Wusheng Night Market and Garden Night Market, frequenting large spaces outside the city centre.

Packed with vendors and brightly lit stalls, these night markets are the perfect place to sample some of Tainan's signature delicacies, including oyster omelettes, swordfish stews, stinky tofu and even *danzai* noodles — wheat noodles in a pork and shrimp broth, topped with meat sauce. Markets' opening days and times can vary, so check schedules online before arriving.

For those who prefer to stay central to the city, plenty of small restaurants and cafes can be found around Tainan's historic

centre, offering everything from shrimp rice to shaved ice and bubble tea. There's even unique old-house bars that blend traditional Taiwanese tea into cocktails. What's more, the religious nature of the area means that Tainan is particularly friendly to vegetarians and vegans, as observant Taiwanese Buddhists often opt to eschew meat, onion and garlic.

### HUALIEN

Located on Taiwan's mountainous east coast, Hualien is known as the gateway to Taroko Gorge, one of Taiwan's most famous national parks. It's a destination of wild, dramatic scenery, with plenty of opportunities for hiking, cycling and even surfing from its rocky beaches.

Hualien is considered by many to be the cultural heartland of the nation's Indigenous people, thanks to their strong presence on this side of the island. This makes it an ideal spot to sample traditional dishes drawing





from Indigenous Taiwanese culture. Local specialities include bamboo tube rice — made by cooking rice and pork inside a bamboo shoot — roasted wild boar, and vegetables flavoured with *maqaw*, a spice from the seeds of the May Chang tree that's locally known as 'mountain pepper'.

Visit in July to catch the Joint Aboriginal Harvest Festival, a celebration of the Indigenous communities local to Hualien. The event features a variety of songs, dances and cultural ceremonies, as well as plenty of stalls offering local dishes, seasonal produce and handmade crafts to purchase.

## HSINCHU

Tradition meets technology in Hsinchu. This coastal city is not only the home of Taiwan's semiconductor industry, but also the heartland of the Hakka community, a distinct cultural group that immigrated to Taiwan from mainland China in the 17th century. Here, travellers have the

opportunity to visit some of the country's premier technological institutions — such as Hsinchu Science Park and nearby National Tsing Hua University — before spending an evening at one of the city's many *izakaya*, informal Japanese-style bars.

Known as the 'windy city', due to its tempestuous coastal climate, it's perhaps unsurprising that Hsinchu's culinary specialities are often of the dried variety. *Mifen*, a type of vermicelli noodle made from rice, is first steamed and then dried in the winds, giving it a distinctive chewy texture. Other local delicacies include dried persimmons harvested from nearby fruit farms and *Lei Cha*, a traditional ground tea that forms a part of Hakka cuisine.

Beyond Hsinchu City, travellers can opt to visit the country's tea farms or take on day hiking routes through Mount Egongj and Mount Niazui. Just over half an hour's train ride from Taipei, Hsinchu is an easily accessible alternative to the capital.

From left: bamboo rice served with salted pork, Hualien; the process of drying persimmons in Hsinchu's winds; the streets of Taiwan's oldest city, Tainan

## PLAN YOUR TRIP

Fly from the UK to Taoyuan International Airport, either nonstop or with a layover in the Middle East, Singapore or Hong Kong. Travel between cities within Taiwan is simple using the high-speed rail (THSR) and local Taiwan railways (TRA). For more information, visit [eng.taiwan.net.tw](http://eng.taiwan.net.tw)

**Taiwan**  
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# ASK THE EXPERTS

NEED ADVICE FOR YOUR NEXT TRIP? ARE YOU AFTER RECOMMENDATIONS, TIPS AND GUIDANCE? OUR EXPERTS HAVE THE ANSWERS...

## THE EXPERTS



**Shafik Meghji**  
Freelance travel writer  
& author of *Crossed Off the Map*



**Carrie-Ann Lightley**  
Freelance writer specialising  
in accessible travel



**Sam Jones**  
Communications delivery  
manager, Cycling UK



**Robbie O'Brien**  
Japan destination  
manager, Trailfinders



**I've been on safari in Africa and would love to try a unique alternative next. Can you suggest any good destinations?**

Beyond the classic safari spots, you'll find plenty of alternatives offering remarkable wildlife encounters, dramatic landscapes and, often, fewer tourists. Try the Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh — home to an estimated 785 wild tigers. Kanha National Park, open from mid-October until June, is the pick of the reserves. 4WD safaris take in forests, rivers and savannah stalked by over 100 of the big cats, not to mention sloth bears, leopards, swamp deer and 300 bird species. Sleep in one of Shergarh's luxurious canvas huts, set in woodland near the reserve. Stays from 17,756 INR (£167) full-board; private jeep safaris from 14,622 INR (£140) [shergarh.com](https://shergarh.com)

Alternatively, in the far north east of India, try a 4WD or walking safari in the grasslands and wetlands of Assam's Kaziranga National Park, which has over 2,600 one-horned rhinos — a species saved from the brink of extinction but still under threat. They share the UNESCO World Heritage Site (open from October to April) with other rare creatures such as Ganges river dolphins and hoolock gibbons. Intrepid's 16-day Sikkim, Assam & Nagaland tour, which includes Kaziranga, starts at £2,315 per person, excluding international flights. [intrepidtravel.com](https://intrepidtravel.com)

Costa Rica is another excellent safari destination, spanning just 0.03% of the Earth's landmass but accounting for a staggering 5% of its fauna. A major nesting site for sea turtles between March and October, Tortuguero National

Park's maze of jungle-fringed waterways, lagoons and beaches is best explored on a boat or kayak trip. Keep your eyes peeled for manatees, caimans and howler monkeys, too. Meanwhile, in southern Costa Rica, the tropical rainforests of Corcovado National Park lay claim to around 50% of the country's biodiversity. Guided hikes along serpentine trails offer the chance to spot everything from scarlet macaws to Baird's tapirs. You may even glimpse a puma or jaguar. Aim to visit during the dry season, between December and April. Journey Latin America has a private 15-day Costa Rica Wildlife Discovery tour featuring Tortuguero and Corcovado from £5,250, based on two people sharing, excluding international flights. [journeylatinamerica.com](https://journeylatinamerica.com)

**SHAFIK MEGHJI**

From left: A pair of collared aracaris in Costa Rica; a weeping cherry tree in Maruyama Park, Kyoto; cycling Norfolk's Rebellion Way



**I'm a wheelchair user looking to book a multi-day group tour. Are there any travel agencies that can help me?**

Group tours have traditionally been a challenging area for wheelchair users. However, there are specialist companies providing a more inclusive offer. Limitless Travel runs curated group holidays with qualified carers on every tour plus accessible transportation and accommodation. Its coach tours cover most of the UK, with highlights including the Somerset & the Seaside

and Scotland Explorer itineraries. The latter begins in Edinburgh's historic core and ends with whisky tasting at Loch Lomond. Its vehicles are fitted with a ramp or a hydraulic lift and wheelchairs can be clamped into place, so there's no need to transfer out of your wheelchair. Limitless also offers trips to destinations including Sicily, the Caribbean, Costa Rica and South Africa. Five- to eight-day tours start from £1,099 per person, including excursions, transport and hotel accommodation,

excluding flights. You also have the option to add personal and one-on-one care packages. [limitlesstravel.org](https://limitlesstravel.org)

Other companies to consider are Enable Holidays and Wheel the World. The former offers a seven-night trip to Crete, taking in the island's grove-swaddled valleys and lakeside villages, while the latter's eight- to 10-person tours include a safari-based itinerary in South Africa. [enableholidays.com](https://enableholidays.com) [wheeltheworld.com](https://wheeltheworld.com)

**CARRIE-ANN LIGHTLEY**



**I'm keen to try a long-distance bikepacking trip in the UK but I hate the idea of riding on busy roads. What are my best options?**

While it's nearly impossible to escape roads entirely, many UK bikepacking routes make good use of off-road trails, relying on only occasional stretches of tarmac to link them together. In England, Cycling UK's Cantii Way in Kent (145 miles) and Norfolk's Rebellion Way (232 miles) are good choices for beginners. Following quiet byways, traffic-free backroads

and cycle paths, both take riders off the beaten track while offering plenty of opportunity for sightseeing. [cyclinguk.org](https://cyclinguk.org)

Scotland is equally blessed with remote routes. Try An Turas Mor (Scots Gaelic for 'the long journey'). Stretching 354 miles from Glasgow to Cape Wrath, it's a more challenging option and best done on a mountain bike, taking riders deep into the Highlands via steep gravel trails and off-road passes. It should take you around eight days. [anturasmor.co.uk](https://anturasmor.co.uk)

There's also Wales's latest long-distance route: the 124-mile Traws Eryri trail. At a leisurely pace, it should take you around four to five days to complete in full, weaving past the Mawddach Estuary and through Coed-y-Brenin forest and Eryri National Park (formerly Snowdonia National Park). Thanks to new access rights, you won't have to navigate traffic to link these landscapes together, as the route is almost entirely off-road. [cyclinguk.org](https://cyclinguk.org)

**SAM JONES**



**I'm too late to book a trip to experience Japan's cherry blossom season this year, but would like to be organised for next year – when should I book and where should I go?**

Japan's *sakura* (cherry blossom season) is incredibly popular, so my advice would be to book about one year before travel. Once you're there, head to Ueno Park in Tokyo, an oasis of pink and white flowers. Locals love to gather under the falling petals for *hanami* (picnic parties to observe the blossom). In Kyoto, a stroll along the Philosopher's Path, lined with hundreds of cherry trees, is a must. Maruyam Park is another of the city's highlights. It's illuminated until midnight each day so nocturnal viewing is possible. Japan's two most touristy cities are always going to be busy, however, so I'd recommend stopping in smaller towns and cities, too. Himeji Castle, west of Osaka, is great for photos. But for the ultimate cherry blossom overload it has to be Mount Yoshino, east of Osaka, as it's covered in over 30,000 cherry trees.

Spring is sakura season, but Japan is fantastic year-round. Autumn is the second-busiest season, thanks to its stunning displays of orange and red foliage. As with spring, it's recommended you book a year in advance for availability in the best viewing destinations. Trailfinders' 15-day Undiscovered Japan itinerary explores the country's lesser-visited highlights and costs £5,449 per person, based on two adults travelling. The cost includes accommodation, international flights, some meals and activities and local transport. [trailfinders.com](https://trailfinders.com)

**ROBBIE O'BRIEN**



THE INFO

# Bhutan

IT'S BEEN 50 YEARS SINCE THIS SMALL HIMALAYAN KINGDOM OPENED ITS BORDERS TO INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS, BECOMING A PIONEER OF HIGH-VALUE, LOW-IMPACT TOURISM

## 1974

The year Druk Yul ('Land of the Thunder Dragon'), as the nation is known locally, first allowed visitors inside its borders, changing a policy that had aimed to protect its culture



THERE ARE NO TRAFFIC LIGHTS IN BHUTAN, WHICH HAS A POPULATION OF UNDER 800,000, AS THEY WERE DEEMED UNNECESSARY AND IMPERSONAL COMPARED TO POLICE OFFICERS

## SUSTAINABILITY IN NUMBERS



### 131

The number of tigers living within Bhutan's borders, up 27% since 2015 – when tracking began – due to habitat destruction in neighbouring India and China



### 60%

THE PROPORTION OF BHUTAN THAT MUST REMAIN COVERED IN FOREST, AS MANDATED BY LAW; IT'S CURRENTLY AROUND 70%



The 250-mile Trans-Bhutan Trail runs east to west through the centre of the country, linking dzongs (fortified monasteries) and mountain valleys. It was restored in 2022; profits from tours go towards maintaining the trail and supporting local communities



THE COST PER PERSON PER NIGHT OF BHUTAN'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FEE TOURIST TAX



### 9.4 million tonnes

The amount of carbon Bhutan sequestered, mainly via its forests, in 2021 – more than double its annual emissions. It's one of only three carbon-positive countries in the world



BHUTAN LEGALISED TELEVISION BROADCASTING AND INTERNET ACCESS IN 1999. BOTH HAD BEEN BANNED FOR FEAR THEY WOULD UNDERMINE THE NATION'S UNIQUE CULTURE

Sources: [bhutan.travel](https://bhutan.travel) [transbhutantrail.com](https://transbhutantrail.com) [wwfbhutan.org.bt](https://wwfbhutan.org.bt)

WORDS: LORNA PARKES. IMAGES: GETTY



## HOT TOPIC

# ICELAND VOLCANOES

As seen in recent eruptions, seismic activity in the country is hotting up. From travel advice to ‘volcano tourism’, here’s what you need to know about visiting

It was the ultimate ‘will it, won’t it’ drama: the ground beneath the Reykjanes Peninsula, near Reykjavík, rumbled on for months, teasing the possibility of a volcanic eruption.

In December 2023, after multiple earthquakes, the wait ended in an explosive finale: a couple of miles northeast of the fishing village of Grindavík, an eruption along a 2.5-mile fissure sent lava into the air.

**What’s the background?** In 2021, after 6,000 years lying dormant, Fagradalsfjall – the volcanic system that erupted in 2023 – sprang back into life with the appearance of a 600ft-long fissure. Until that moment, the Reykjanes Peninsula hadn’t seen an eruption for over 800 years. Three small blasts followed (in 2021, 2022 and the summer of 2023), each producing fountains of fire.

A nine-mile dike (an underground pathway that allows magma to travel towards the surface) on the Reykjanes Peninsula has been found to be the underlying cause, and since then there have been further eruptions that have reached the town of Grindavík. If additional volcanic activity occurs, it’s likely to take place nearby.

## What does it mean for travellers?

So far, the greatest disruption has been to the residents of Grindavík, who were evacuated prior to the December eruption. Following the latest blasts, some homes here have been destroyed by lava. The nearby Blue Lagoon, the country’s most popular attraction, has briefly closed, on and off, as a precautionary response to the eruptions, but has not been otherwise impacted. Reykjavík and the international airport, meanwhile, were unaffected.

Some passengers on flights that have flown over eruption sites have been treated to spectacular scenes from their window seats.



The Fagradalsfjall volcano during an eruption

‘Volcano tourists’ have since converged on the area, hoping for a glimpse of the lava. However, Icelandic police warned people to “think four times” before attempting to get close to the sites, after an exhausted hiker had to be rescued by helicopter.

**What happens next?** As volcanoes can be unpredictable, it’s hard to say with 100% certainty. “Most volcanologists seem to agree that this period of volcanic activity is going to go on for many years, if not decades,” says Dr Robin Andrews, a volcanologist. But, “it’s difficult to study the systems where there’s no central volcano.”

**Is there likely to be a repeat of the 2010 ash cloud?** Experts in the fields of volcanology and aviation agree that a repeat of the events that followed the Eyjafjallajökull eruption likely won’t happen again. Back then, a six-day shutdown of European airspace, due to the presence of

ash in quantities sufficient to cause engine failure in planes, caused the cancellation of some 100,000 flights.

The fact that Fagradalsfjall doesn’t open onto a large ice sheet, as Eyjafjallajökull does, minimises the amount of ash likely to be ejected – when ice melts into a volcano, the magma cools rapidly and forms fine ash particles. Additionally, the world of aviation has seen advancements in technology since 2010, and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency has confirmed it’s better prepared for a volcanic ash event.

**Is it safe to go to Iceland?** Volcanic activity is currently largely isolated to the Reykjanes Peninsula. Apart from the area around Fagradalsfjall, Iceland is safe and its main tourist sites remain open.

Dr Andrews recommends that anyone planning to travel to the country monitors the advice of the Icelandic Meteorological Office, which shares comprehensive data

on the latest activity. The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office travel pages are also updated as conditions change. While in Iceland, monitor local news and heed local authority guidance. [en.vedur.is](https://en.vedur.is) [fcogov.uk](https://fcogov.uk)

“There’s a lot of uncertainty,” says Snorri Valsson, of the Icelandic Tourist Board. “It’s a localised seismic event limited to the area around Grindavík – in the rest of the island, it’s business as usual. But it’s understandable that some people might be disturbed by the news.”

**What about insurance?** Always make sure you take out comprehensive insurance when booking a trip to ensure you’re covered before departure. At least £2,500 is a good level of protection for short-haul trips. Ensure the policy covers repatriation in the event you need to head home early.

**BEN CLATWORTHY**  
*Travel and transport correspondent at The Times*



## REPORT

# CAN AVIATION HIT NET ZERO?

IN THE WAKE OF VIRGIN ATLANTIC MAKING THE FIRST TRANSATLANTIC FLIGHT POWERED BY SUSTAINABLE AVIATION FUEL, HOW REALISTIC IS THE AVIATION INDUSTRY'S PLEDGE TO GO CARBON NEUTRAL BY 2050? WORDS: DUNCAN CRAIG

Back in February 2020, when the UK aviation industry signed a pledge to cut net carbon emissions to zero by mid-century, then Heathrow Airport chief executive John Holland-Kaye reached for a memorable analogy. "I imagine it's like it is for alcoholics," he said. "The first step is to admit we have a problem — and then do something about it."

In such a context, perhaps Virgin Atlantic's transatlantic flight last November powered solely by sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) should be viewed as that first tentative night out with friends sipping alcohol-free beer. Made from a blend of waste fats and plant sugars, the innovative fuel — indistinguishable from the real stuff to the naked eye — has the potential to slash CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by up to 70%, compared to fossil-based jet fuel, over the course of its lifecycle.

"History has been made," said UK secretary of state for transport Mark Harper, on arrival in New York. Virgin founder Sir Richard Branson enthused: "The world will always assume something can't be done, until you do it."

But whether the 'chip fat flight', as it was labelled in some quarters, comes to be seen as a pioneering moment on the path to carbon-neutral aviation or merely a stunt to appease passengers' burgeoning eco-consciences will depend very much on what happens next. The path to sobriety, fuel-based or otherwise, is long and hazardous.

The carbon-free quest certainly isn't premature: aviation's role in the environmental crisis is significant — and growing. According to an international study published in the scientific journal *Atmospheric Environment*, approximately 3.5% of all human-driven climate change to date is attributed to flying — an impact akin to that of a large developed country. It also estimated that of the 32.6 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions generated by global aviation since 1940, half has come in the past 20 years. Galloping expansion and the complexity of the aviation industry's decarbonisation relative to other sectors means emissions will likely continue to soar for some time yet. "At current rates, aviation is expected to become one of the largest emitting sectors by 2050. We have to break the link between air travel and rising global temperatures," said then transport secretary Grant Shapps in the foreword to the Department for Transport's (DfT) Jet Zero strategy, launched in July 2022.

The International Air Transport Association (IATA), which itself enshrined a Fly Net Zero 2050 commitment at its annual general meeting in Boston in 2021, said in December that it expects global aviation passengers to reach a record 4.7 billion in 2024, topping the 4.5 billion of 2019 and generating just shy of a trillion dollars in airline revenue.

Given the pace of the post-Covid bounceback, IATA's 10

billion projection for passenger numbers in 2050 suddenly appears as reachable as it is alarming. Without mitigation, that rocket-like growth trajectory would see an additional 21.2 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> pumped into the atmosphere between now and mid-century.

Thus, the imperative of decarbonising — at the heart of which lies the SAF issue. IATA, which represents 320 airlines comprising more than 80% of global air traffic, sees sustainable fuels as a way of achieving nearly two-thirds of the reduction in emissions needed, with the other third made up of more fuel-efficient routes and aircraft, alternative propulsion technology such as electric and hydrogen, and offsetting.

The UK — a self-anointed 'SAF superpower' in the making — is attempting to spearhead global action on decarbonisation in the coming decade. As part of this commitment, it's set ambitious targets through Jet Zero: a minimum of 10% SAF in the aviation fuel mix used by all airlines by 2030 (for the wider EU it's 6%) and all domestic flights and all airport operations in England to achieve net zero by 2040.

Heathrow, by far the largest UK airport, with 79.1 million passengers in 2023, is going even further: a target of 11% SAF usage by 2030, helped by an incentive programme that covers up to 50% of any cost difference, which

currently sits at upwards of 2.5 times that of conventional jet fuel.

The drive is not entirely propelled by climatic concerns. In a slick video message shown to those aboard the 'Virgin100' flight, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said SAFs could create a UK industry with a turnover of £2.5bn a year, supporting 5,000 jobs.

### Fuel goals

The attraction of SAF is obvious: it can be used in any concentration (all British Airways flights from Heathrow currently operate with 1%), without the need to modify either fuel infrastructure or aircraft. Derived from a broad range of sources — everything from agricultural and forestry residues to municipal waste, oils and greases — it offers greater energy security. And unlike some of the other pathways to decarbonisation, it is at least tried and tested. Since the first partial-SAF test flight in 2008, also by Virgin, nearly half a million flights have operated with some proportion in their tanks.

There are, however, two major drawbacks: there's hardly any of it out there and there's barely any capacity to make it. In 2023, SAF made up just 0.2% of airline fuel consumed globally, with around 600 million litres produced. If the new fuels are to do the heavy lifting decarbonisers are banking on, output needs to hit 450 billion litres by mid-century. The ambition, and challenge, is staggering.





An airliner prepares to land at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport in Thailand





Last November, the government announced the latest tranche of spending in its £135m Advanced Fuels Fund. One recipient has been the University of Sheffield. Professor Mohamed Pourkashanian, who heads up its research into sustainable aviation fuels, is optimistic about their potential — particularly that of Power to Liquid (PtL), a synthetically produced liquid hydrocarbon that blends hydrogen separated from water by renewable energy with carbon from captured CO<sub>2</sub>. “It’s in the early stages and not yet bankable,” he says. “But it’s significantly better, offering a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> of over 90%.”

A report by global management consultancy McKinsey claimed that ‘no mature, fully integrated PtL player is yet operating

at scale’ and that a potential ‘thousandfold’ increase in 10 years will be needed for it to make a meaningful contribution to decarbonisation. Any such rampant upscaling of PtL would be predicated on abundant stocks of renewable energy, something the UK is years — if not decades — away from. Nevertheless, Pourkashanian argues the UK could be producing enough SAF in the next 10 years to not just fuel its own aviation industry but to export.

Carrie Harris, head of sustainability at British Airways, is a fellow PtL advocate. She claims the airline is already a quarter of the way to meeting its 10% 2030 target, buoyed by £9m of government money for its Project Speedbird SAF plants in Teesside and Georgia, USA.

It’s also investing, via parent company International Airlines Group (IAG), in electric aviation startup ZeroAvia. UK-based Ecojet — which bills itself as the world’s first all-electric airline — plans to start flying routes from Edinburgh later this year in conventionally powered 20-seat planes before retrofitting them with ZeroAvia’s zero-emissions engines in 2025. Larger, 70-seat turboprops, with a range of 300 miles, are expected in 2027.

EasyJet, the UK’s biggest airline in terms of passenger numbers, is embracing SAF — in 2021 it operated a 30%-blend flight from Gatwick. But it sees hydrogen power as the key to long-term decarbonisation. Several test flights have been conducted by Swiss start-up Destinys. Its prototype, Eiger, is shaped like

a paper airplane and about as polluting; heat and water are the main emissions. This is just the start, says the company’s senior business development manager Martina Löfqvist.

“Our ultimate dream is to get an aircraft that can carry 400 passengers and go ultra long — maybe Europe to Australia direct,” she says. Two of the challenges are the scarcity and high price of hydrogen — although Löfqvist expects the latter to fall as production ramps up. The EU pledging to generate 10 million tonnes of green hydrogen and import 10 million tonnes more by 2030 heightens confidence.

“Aviation is by its nature highly innovative,” says BA’s Harris. “When I look at the amount of effort and innovation I feel optimistic. Ten years ago this technology — around SAF, hydrogen, ZeroAvia — didn’t exist. The advancement has been incredible.”

**The government** argues that the only way to decarbonise is to keep flying — a Faustian pact to avert an Icarian calamity

A380 aircraft being refuelled  
Right: Biogas plant producing green energy







## Balancing act

The elephant in the room — one we all got a glimpse of during the pandemic — is, of course, stopping flying altogether. But this will never happen in the UK. Aviation and its ancillary sectors are simply too valuable, contributing £22bn to GDP and supporting (directly or indirectly) almost a million jobs, according to Sustainable Aviation, a group that represents the UK's airlines, airports and aerospace manufacturers.

But if going cold turkey isn't feasible, let's at least see some moderation, says Dr Doug Parr, policy director at Greenpeace UK. "It's completely ridiculous that the concept of demand constraint doesn't seem to be even a feature of discussion," he says. "The aviation industry always wants continued expansion; and they always get it." He said he understands that flying is "entrenched", particularly for tourism, but wants to see a frequent flyer levy that incrementally penalises the 15% of people in the UK who take 70% of flights.

The government argues that the only way to decarbonise is to keep flying — a Faustian pact to avert an Icarian calamity. At

the Airlines 2023 Conference in London last November, DfT aviation director David Silk reiterated the case for expansion. "It's emphatically the case that we need growth," he said. "We want to enable people to fly to generate the revenue to be able to decarbonise. If we don't invest, we risk having an old, rusting infrastructure that can't decarbonise."

While new technologies come on stream, offsetting is going to be crucial: the Sustainable Aviation group believes the contribution needs to be as much as a third of the proposed net carbon reduction by 2050. Jonathon Counsell, group head of sustainability at IAG, calls offsetting a "transitional measure" and stressed that schemes in the often maligned sector have to be "high-quality, independently verified and end in actual additional carbon removal".

For all the UK's aspirations around decarbonisation, a siloed approach to something as manifestly transnational as aviation's carbon emissions would seem to make about as much sense as those little curtains you used to get around onboard smoking sections. Professor David Lee, a

professor of atmospheric science at Manchester Metropolitan University, agrees: "It's great that the UK has its own target and wants to push that," he says. "But you have to realise it's a global sector and global industry and it takes [multiple] governments to push this along."

While the chasm between the situation now and the blue-skied idyll envisaged a mere 26 years from now may seem unbridgeable, Pourkashanian prefers to look on the bright side. "If in the case of SAF we're only currently producing 0.2%, and you see how much is going to be needed to replace [traditional fossil] jet fuel, then you can see the opportunity." Investors, he says, are flooding into the market. A green gold rush? "It's already happening."

Lee accepts that flights such as #Virgin100 are partly PR exercises but doesn't think this is necessarily a bad thing. "As a result, we're talking about this issue," he says. "The situation [aviation emissions] is a huge problem. It's a nightmare. None of which means you should throw your hands up in the air and say 'it's too hard'." ▢

## IN NUMBERS Decarbonisation

# 10 billion

The projected number of global aviation passengers per year by 2050

# 13-15%

The current proportion of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions estimated to come from aviation

# 300%

The projected year-on-year increase in sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) production in 2024 – to 1.875 billion litres

# 490,000

Commercial flights to date that have operated with some level of SAF

# 90%

Reduction in carbon emissions using Power to Liquid (PtL)

# 3,800mph

The top speed Swiss start-up Destinus is planning for its long-range, hydrogen-powered passenger jets

# 20%

Estimated peak improvement in fuel efficiency of each new generation of aircraft in recent decades

# 1.5C

The target temperature, above pre-industrialised levels, for global warming, agreed by 195 nations in the UN's 2015 Paris Agreement



# Japan Beyond the tracks

From significant shrines to maple leaf delicacies, the region of Kansai is full of unique experiences to unearth. Traverse this sacred landscape via Japan's excellent rail network. Words: Oliver Smith

Home to the country's first capital, many of Japan's most sacred Shinto shrines and a hinterland adorned with holy mountains, the region of Kansai not only marks the geographical centre of Japan but also stands as a cultural and historical heartland for the nation. Among its greatest treasures is Kyoto, which served as the imperial capital of Japan from the eighth to the 19th century, and is now renowned for its temples, geishas and gardens. Today, Kyoto remains as enchanting as ever, with ancient alleyways still evoking a picture-book Japan reminiscent of samurai and shoguns.

Kyoto has a counterpoint nearby in Osaka — a stridently modern metropolis with a future-facing philosophy. This cutting-edge outlook is especially evident as Osaka prepares to host the Expo 2025, organised by the Bureau International des Expositions. An estimated 28 million people are expected to travel to the artificial island of Osaka Bay during the six-month event. During this time, Kansai will showcase its commitment to designing a future centred around innovative solutions.

Journeying westward from Osaka leads travellers to Hyogo Prefecture, home to

the modern city of Kobe. Travelling north east from Osaka brings you to Shiga, a prefecture encircling the serene shores of Lake Biwa, Japan's largest. Located in the south of Shiga is the Kii Peninsula which holds the prefectures of Mie, Nara, and Wakayama — a green expanse that's home to sites held sacred in both Shintoism and Buddhism. Tokushima Prefecture faces the Kii Peninsula on the eastern shore of the island of Shikoku. Tokushima is a place of pilgrimage, drawing countless souls to the forest trails and its 88 renowned temples.

While Kansai is home to many world-famous attractions, the region also offers opportunities for visitors to explore beyond the well-trodden paths. Take, for instance, Fukui and Tottori Prefectures, neighbouring regions situated along the Sea of Japan. Despite their captivating coastal landscapes, both receive fewer tourists than the rest of Kansai.

Kansai offers a chance to experience the best of Japan within a relatively small area. Train travel is an excellent way to unlock this region's wealth of destinations and is a greener way to get around. Whether navigating urban metros or taking the leisurely rural branch lines, riding the rails is, in its own right, an essential Japanese experience.





## JR WEST

### TRAVEL THE EXPANSE OF KANSAI

Upon arrival in Japan, many visitors encounter the Kansai-Airport Express HARUKA. This train shuttles passengers from Kansai International Airport to Osaka and Kyoto. Distinguished by its Hello Kitty-themed livery, it is operated by the West Japan Railway Company, also known as JR West — the main railway company in this region. They also manage the high-speed Sanyo Shinkansen line, connecting major stations throughout west Japan, such as Osaka and Hakata.

If you've time, take the opportunity to ride one of JR West's leisurely sightseeing trains, like the Umi Yama Musubi service. This train weaves through verdant hills from Amarube to the hot springs of Kinokuni Onsen.

Many trains run by this company allow you to reach less-explored areas such as Tottori and Fukui prefectures. Both regions are gastronomic hubs and renowned for their fresh seafood and great restaurants. Tottori is known for its Matsuba crab, whereas Echizen crab is prized in Fukui — characterised by its long legs.

## OSAKA METRO

### VISIT OSAKA & EXPO 2025

The Osaka Metro's nine lines serve as vital arteries, pumping life through the vibrant metropolis, making it an indispensable means of travel.

Keep an eye out for the Chuo Line, which is currently undergoing an extension to the artificial island of Yumeshima in preparation for Expo 2025. The Chuo Line 400 Series train launched in June 2023 and features an impressive, futuristic design, having been modelled on a spaceship.

Begin by visiting the central Kita district at the Umeda Sky Building, whose viewing deck offers magnificent vistas across the vast urban sprawl. Next, take the Metro to Osaka-jo, a replica of a long-lost 17th-century castle built in 1931 standing regally over moated grounds. Allow another 15 minutes to reach the vibrant, neon-lit Dotonbori district which can be accessed from Osaka Metro Namba Station and from Shinsaibashi Station. Renowned as a nightlife hub and as a great shopping destination, it's also an excellent location to try Osaka's signature street-food dishes, such as *takoyaki* (fried octopus balls) and *butaman* (pork buns).

Clockwise from left: Osaka Castle in Osaka City; Dotonbori Canal in central Osaka, a popular entertainment district; Kinokuni Onsen village with spring cherry blossoms in Hyogo





## HANKYU RAILWAY

### SEE THE BEST OF KYOTO AND OSAKA

The Kyo-train Garaku operates between Kyoto-kawaramachi Station and Osaka-umeda Station. Travellers stepping aboard this weekend service will quickly notice its exceptional nature, featuring ornately designed carriages, each individually themed to reflect the different seasons. Look out for cherry blossom fabrics in the spring carriage, iris motifs in the summer carriage, muted hues in the autumn one and shoji paper screens with dry gardens in the carriage representing winter.

Hankyu Railway, the operator of the Kyo-train Garaku, provides access to key locations in Kyoto, such as Arashiyama and the Yasaka Shrine. There are also opportunities to explore beyond the carriages. Ride trains from central Osaka to Hankyu Minoh Station, where you can embark on an accessible 40-minute hike to the stunning Minoh Falls. Here, a cascade of more than 30 metres is fringed by maple trees that blaze red in autumn. Maple trees also find their way into *momiji tempura* — a local speciality, where their leaves are battered, giving a sweet taste and found in restaurants near Hanku Minoh Station.

## HANSHIN ELECTRIC RAILWAY

### TOUR SAKE BREWERIES IN HYOGO

The Hanshin Electric Railway comprises several lines connecting Osaka and Hyogo. The company is also the proud owner of the Hanshin Tigers, one of the nation's favourite baseball clubs. Hanshin Electric Railway provides a valuable means of making a home run out of Osaka into more rustic areas of Hyogo Prefecture — notably NadaGogo, a collective name for the five villages of Nada, which together constitute one of Japan's most significant sake-brewing areas.

The rice wine was first made in NadaGogo in the 14th century, benefiting from the local mineral-rich spring water. Today, 25 breweries line the hillsides above Kobe, and Hyogo Prefecture, including NadaGogo — the nation's number one producer of sake. Some breweries are open for tours, inviting visitors to explore the fermenting tanks and sample their specialities. Hakutsuru is the world's largest sake producer, however there are many other sake breweries in NadaGogo, each with their own unique character and dedication. Look out for the themed NadaGogo train that services the area on the Hanshin Electric Railway.

Clockwise from right: Aerial view of Ise-Shima National Park; Koyasan's Danjo Garan temple complex, a place of learning and teaching for Shingon Buddhism; Fushimi Inari Shrine, the head of Japan's Inari shrines; NadaGogo, the largest sake producing area in Japan; the Arashiyama Bamboo Grove in Kyoto







## KINTETSU RAILWAY

### JOURNEY TO A NATIONAL PARK

With its island-studded coastline and abundant forests, Ise-Shima National Park stands as one of Japan's most beautiful destinations — and also one of its most sacred. It's home to one of the country's most significant Shinto shrines, Ise Jingu.

To make the journey there from Osaka, hop on the premium sightseeing train operated by the Kintetsu Railway, which takes just 90 minutes. Evocatively named Shimakaze, meaning 'Shima wind', the train offers a comfortable ride, fully equipped with facilities such as massage chairs and a cafe serving Matsusaka beef.

Upon arrival at Ise, tread the woodland walkways surrounding the much-hallowed Ise Grand Shrine. Dating back to the third century, it's an ancient site, yet, at the same time, remarkably modern, as it's rebuilt from scratch every two decades.

Next, continue on to the southern coast, where you can experience the region's *ama* culture and learn about the women who free-dive along the seabed where they harvest shellfish. Finally, before boarding the return train to Osaka, be sure to dine on the region's signature Japanese spiny lobster, a local speciality.

## KEIHAN RAILWAY

### TRAVERSE CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES

The Keihan Railway excels at transporting passengers between popular destinations in Osaka and Kyoto, as well as facilitating exploration to the lesser-known places in between. Northeast from Osaka, consider a stop at Uji — a quaint town recognised for its distinctive green tea and for the world heritage site, Byodoin Temple Phoenix hall. Riding the train for a few more stops will lead you to the famous Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine. Trains also stop in Gion, Kyoto's famous geisha quarter.

## NANKAI ELECTRIC RAILWAY

### RIDE IN A RETRO-FUTURISTIC TRAIN

One of Japan's — if not the world's — most visually striking trains is the Rapi:t, a limited express service connecting Kansai International Airport to Osaka's Namba station. It boasts a retro-futuristic design, with sleek curves and modern circular windows. The Rapi:t covers routes south of Osaka and is operated by the Nankai Electric Railway, which also runs the more old-school Tenku sightseeing service. This train meanders from Hashimoto station to Koyasan, a ninth-century temple complex set on a mountaintop.

## PLAN YOUR TRIP

Multiple airlines fly from UK airports to Osaka Kansai International Airport. Each flight requires one stop en route in destinations such as South Korea, Shanghai or Dubai. Once in Kansai, there are excellent rail options to navigate the region. For Expo 2025, travel on the Osaka Metro Chuo Line travel on the Osaka Metro Chuo Line to Yumeshima Station. For more information, visit [the-kansai-guide.com](https://the-kansai-guide.com)





# Japan **Kansai's cultural odyssey**

Wander the pathways of holy pilgrimages, learn from ancient art forms and savour traditional cuisine in the region of Kansai, Japan's cultural heartland. Words: Oliver Smith







An ama diver preparing shellfish in Mie Prefecture  
Left: Katsuoji temple during autumn in Minoh, Osaka  
Right: Daruma dolls representing good fortune



Modern Japan wouldn't be what it is today without the influence and input of the region of Kansai — and its cities Osaka and Kyoto — which have significantly influenced the country's political, cultural and economic development. Kyoto served as Japan's capital for over a millennium and is today known as the nation's cultural epicentre, attracting millions of travellers to the city's streets each year.

Beyond Kyoto, visitors will see there is a profound respect for tradition throughout the region found in the theatre, religion, art and cuisine. From classical masked Noh performances to ancient Shinto shrines believed to be the home of local kami (spirits or deities) to traditional *kaiseki* banquets — there are myriad experiences and the region reveals new depths with every visit.

## 1 MIE PREFECTURE DINE WITH AMA DIVERS

Stretching along the rural southeastern coast of Kansai, Mie Prefecture is perfect for an extended trip by road or rail. Most intriguing, however, are the *ama* divers of the region. Meaning 'women of the sea', *ama* were once common across Japan, but as of 2023, Mie boasts the largest number of active *ama* today, with an impressive 514 located here out of a national total of 1,220.

The *ama* women free-dive to the sea floor using just their bodies and simple tools to source seafood including precious abalone (a unique marine snail). To protect the ocean's resources, the divers are careful, ensuring they only catch what they need.

Visitors are able to dine with the divers at Satoumian's *ama* hut experience. Here, groups gather in a replica of an original *ama* hut and listen to tales from the divers.

## 2 OSAKA PREFECTURE EXPLORE ANCIENT TEMPLES

The Katsuoji temple lies only 15 miles from the mega-city of Osaka — but in another sense, it's a universe away. The magnificent grounds are surrounded by serene forests and offer impressive views for each of the four seasons. Since 727 CE, Katsuoji has been associated with its 'victor's luck', after a sick emperor is said to have prayed here and seen his health miraculously restored. The emperor went on to name the temple 'Katsuoji', with the initial meaning of 'victorious king temple'.

Today, the tradition continues, evident in its resident population of *daruma* dolls — small red figures of various sizes that act as wish-fulfilling lucky charms. Visitors travelling to the temple write on the bottom of the *daruma* dolls what victory they would like in their own lives and pray for them.



### 3 KYOTO CITY TASTE TRADITIONAL CUISINE

Kyoto was the capital of Japan for a thousand years, and it remains the capital of traditional Japanese gastronomy. Many chefs still look to the city's rich culinary past for inspiration with their cooking today.

To savour the city's distinctive cuisine, head to Manshige Kyoto-style Cuisine — a traditional restaurant with beautifully designed rooms with tatami floors. The restaurant has been operating since 1937 and is now guided by a third-generation master chef. Here, visitors can dine on the signature simmered sea bream — once beloved by successful businessmen of the textile industry — or embark on a *kaiseki* banquet, in which an array of small and intricate dishes are shuttled to your table.

### 4 NARA PREFECTURE HIKE THROUGH HIGHLANDS

Poised midway between the modern metropolises of Osaka and Nagoya sits Soni, one of Japan's most beautiful rural villages. This picturesque pitstop is home to scenic mountain trails and renowned pampas grass, used in ages past to thatch nearby rooftops. This region is the birthplace of *urushi*, a natural lacquer integral to Japanese crafts — a tradition that traces back to the Heian period (795-1185).

Visitors can explore the expansive Soni Highland, home to a sweeping plateau covering 99 acres towards the base of Mt. Kuroso. Expert guides offer tours, sharing tales of local folklore and insights into conservation efforts. Later, visitors can relax at Okame-no-yu, a highland onsen (hot spring), for a rejuvenating retreat.

### 5 WAKAYAMA PREFECTURE TASTE FRESH BLUEFIN TUNA

An essential component in many sushi and sashimi dishes, bluefin tuna can be as precious as gold in Japan — a single fish sold for £2.36 million in 2019.

To see these tuna as they swim, head to Kushimoto, a town at the farthest end of the Kii Peninsula, with its harbour strung along a natural isthmus. Notably, this town was the first place in the world where Pacific bluefin tuna were successfully fully farmed. Visitors can feed the bluefin tuna here, weighing between 10kg and 40kg each.

Afterwards, travellers can head south to the Shionomisaki Lighthouse, located on Cape Shionomisaki — its blinking light stands sentinel at the southernmost point of Japan's main island, Honshu.

### 6 KYOTO PREFECTURE LEARN ABOUT AGE-OLD CRAFTS

Nothing to do with the Argentine dance of the same name, the Tango Peninsula is a thumb of land jutting out into the sea, crowned by emerald hills and edged by sandy coves. It's well known for Tango *Chirimen*, an elegant silk crêpe that has been woven here for around three centuries, with the drumming of looms a rare disturbance to the serenity of this rustic nook.

The silk weaves its way to all corners of Japan, with some 70% of the fabric used for all kimonos coming from Tango. The material is highly prized for its finely textured surface and its dye-ability. In the town of Kyotango, visitors can tour the Tayuh factory, which has been in business for almost a century. Here, the diligent work of master craftspeople can be witnessed.

Below, from left: Shirahige Shrine on Lake Biwa; pilgrims making a journey to the temples in Shikoku. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Autumn fields of pampas grass in Soni Highland; fishing for tuna in Wakayama Prefecture; Tango Chirimen, a silk crepe woven in the Tango Peninsula; a traditional *kaiseki* banquet at Manshige Kyoto-style Cuisine, a restaurant in Kyoto City







## 7 SHIGA PREFECTURE KAYAK TO A TORII GATE

Lake Biwa is Japan's largest lake — and a worthy place for visitors to immerse themselves in the country's spiritual life. Watching over this shimmering body of water is the holy peak of Mount Hiei, measuring 848m. Mount Hiei is known as the 'mother mountain of Japanese Buddhism' as many high-ranking monks have trained here. Monks still visit Mount Hiei to take part in a gruelling 1,000-day pilgrimage where they repeatedly walk around the same route, known as *kaihogyo* (circling the mountain). Perhaps most peaceful of all is Shirahige Shrine on Lake Biwa's western shore. Here, visitors can kayak up to a vermillion-coloured Torii gate — a structure symbolising a threshold between the material and divine worlds.

## 8 TOKUSHIMA PREFECTURE JOIN A HISTORIC PILGRIMAGE

The Shikoku Pilgrimage measures some 745 miles, passes by 88 temples, takes roughly six weeks or more to complete and welcomes 100,000 participants annually. At the same time, it has a magic that cannot be expressed in numbers. Outsiders can join this legendary circular pilgrimage route that traces the coast of the island of Shikoku, passing a rich mosaic of landscapes, from noisy cities to serene forests. The route follows in the footsteps of Kobo Daishi, the 8th-century monk who spent time here. The defining sight of Shikoku is that of the *henro* — pilgrims adorned in the traditional attire, featuring a straw hat, white garments symbolising purity, and a *kongozue* staff to use as a walking stick representing the companionship of Kobo Daishi.



## 9 FUKUI PREFECTURE SAIL TO THE SOTOMO ARCH

Fairly few outsiders visit Fukui Prefecture, — yet those who do discover a coastline of hidden bays and sublime rock formations. None are more spectacular than the Sotomo Arch. Here, aeons of wave action have hewn a natural bridge out of granite cliffs — just wide enough for a small boat to pass beneath.

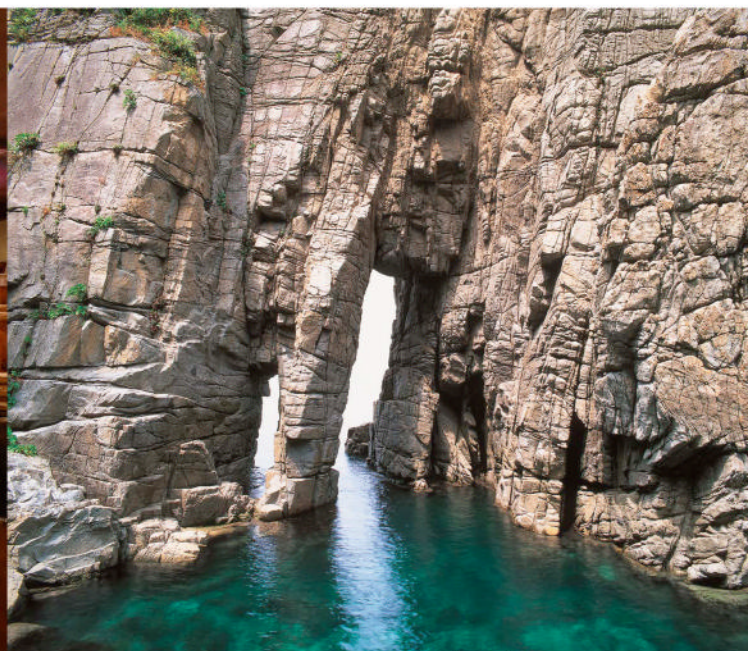
After a local seafood lunch at Kaikoen restaurant in Obama City, travellers can book onto a boat tour departing from the nearby Wakasa Fisherman's Wharf. They'll spend an hour tracking the steep shores of the Uchitomi Peninsula and learning about the history of the area before reaching the rocks, battered by the swells from the Sea of Japan. The arch is part of a beautiful four-mile stretch made up of rugged cliffs and dramatic cave entrances.

Below, clockwise from left:  
Sawanotsuru Museum, a sake brewery preserving traditional methods; a sailing trip to Sotomo Arch; black soybeans in Tamba-Sasayama; a masked actor in a classical Noh theatre performance of Hanagatami  
Opposite, from left: A tour of the Sakai fishing port in Sakaiminato; Shakyo, an ancient art form of hand-copying the sutras

## 10 OSAKA CITY ENJOY A CLASSICAL SHOW

Noh is Japan's traditional masked theatre performance, an art form that has captivated audiences in Kansai since the Middle Ages. The show focuses on actors adorned in elaborate costumes, with their mesmerising movements accompanied by the music of four instruments (a flute, a taiko and a small and large tsuzumi).

It's said to be the oldest surviving form of stage performance the world. Ohtsuki Noh Theatre is one of the few of its kind in the Kansai region to have escaped the destruction of the Second World War. Inside, you'll find an all-cypress wooden stage, fringed by a perimeter of white pebbles. The theatre holds regular productions and there are beginner's workshops for those wishing to be initiated into this ancient artform.







## 11 HYOGO PREFECTURE TOUR TAMBA BEANFIELDS

A ring of mountains guard the fertile basin of Tamba-Sasayama, where patchwork fields straddle the banks of a rushing river. This area is the heartland of the Tamba 'black soybean' cultivation — a variety of beans prized for their delicate taste, which become particularly prominent around New Year when it symbolises good health.

To see these legendary beanfields up close, visitors can take a guided tour to learn about the growing, harvesting and shipping process. There is also the option to explore Tamba's many quaint villages, visit local communities and hike in the nearby countryside. During the December harvest season, travellers will see roads alive with bean fans keen to secure some of the crop.

## 12 KOBE CITY SAMPLE FAMOUS SAKE

Among gourmands, 'Kobe' is synonymous with Japan's best beef. However, this likeable city is also known for its excellent sake. The Nada district possesses all the requisite ingredients for producing the cherished rice wine: calcium- and potassium-rich spring water, an abundance of rice paddies, and a helpful proximity to Kobe port, allowing colourful sake barrels to be exported far and wide.

A great way to learn about sake is on a guided tour of the Nada district which stretches for almost two miles from east to west. Visitors will be taken along riverside promenades, stopping by storied sake breweries to taste different labels. Some also have museums to provide more information about the history of the sake they produce.

## 13 SAKAI CITY STUDY AN ANCIENT ART

*Shakyo* refers to the art of hand-copying the sutras — a practice that thrived during the 8th century as Buddhism began to take root in Japan. Typically, the activity was undertaken by people as an expression of piety. Fast forward to the 21st century, and some temples now offer *shakyo* classes for visitors. Students are given the opportunity to experience a sense of mindfulness as they trace the contours of Japanese letters and develop intense focus while guiding the ink.

One of the best places to try *shakyo* is Myohoji, a temple in the port town of Sakai City, on the southern side of Osaka Bay. In this peaceful sanctuary, students can put calligraphy brush to paper — and, in more ways than one, turn over a new leaf.

## 14 TOTTORI PREFECTURE VISIT HISTORIC HARBOURS

Tottori is the least populous of Japan's 47 prefectures, though what it lacks in headcount, it makes up for in scenery. It's home to the 1,729m mass of Daisen, a mountain that rises from the shore, serving as a talisman for fishermen navigating the lonely leagues of the surrounding sea.

Daisen can be seen from Sakaiminato, a historic port city set on a sandbar at the northwestern end of Tottori Prefecture. Sakaiminato stands as the epicentre of the fishing industry in western Japan, boasting one of the largest catches of tuna and red snow crab in Japan, as well as horse mackerel. Explore its quays as part of an organised tour, observing the freshly caught fish that are being processed, as well as the wholesale market where they are sold.

### PLAN YOUR TRIP

Multiple airlines fly from Heathrow, Gatwick and Birmingham airports to Osaka Kansai International Airport. Each flight requires one stop en route in destinations such as South Korea, Shanghai or Dubai. Once in Kansai, there are excellent rail options. For more information, visit [the-kansai-guide.com](http://the-kansai-guide.com)



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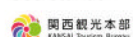
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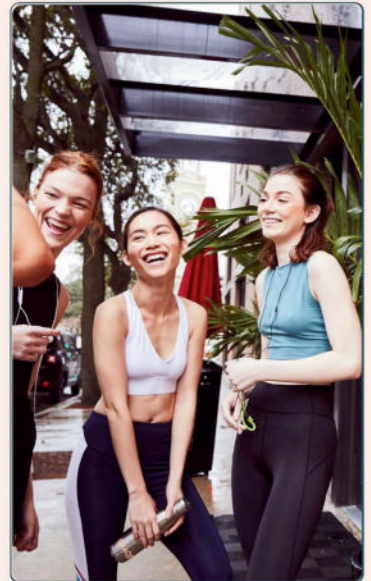
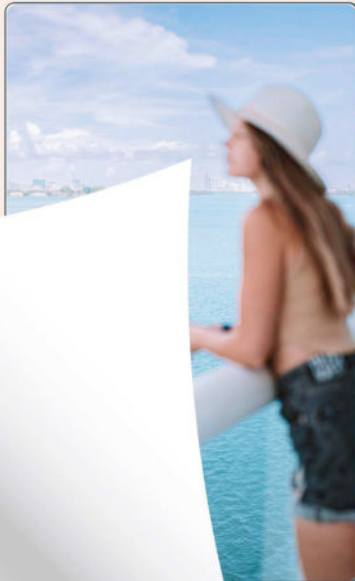
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The county of Nordland in Norway, one of the entries in The Cool List 2024

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## STAR LETTER

### Cool adventures

My partner and I really enjoy reading your magazine and have used it to plan many adventures over the years. Unfortunately, we're not able to venture far these days due to caring for my elderly mother. We found 'The Cool List 2024' (Cover story, December 2023) very inspiring. It was lovely to find out about some of the gems we have here in the British Isles, so much so that we've booked a short break to North Yorkshire. It was a great reminder that you don't need to venture far to discover new and interesting destinations.

HOMERA KHAN



## City slicker

The 'Only in New York' feature (Cover story, November 2023) dropped through my letterbox at just the right time. Two days later, I jetted off to the Big Apple for a six-day city break and took the magazine along for the ride. I'm so glad I took your advice and walked the High Line, which has transformed a historic rail line into a public park. It's like a peaceful oasis, right in the heart of the city. I was also pleased you mentioned the ride on the Staten Island Ferry, which offers breathtaking views of the city and Statue of Liberty. **RICHARD FELTON**

## South American dream

I found your Argentina feature (Cover story, Jan/Feb 2024) so well researched and beautifully presented. It covered anything a traveller who's considering visiting this country could wish to know — a snapshot in words and pictures of the landscapes, people, experiences and, of course, amazing food Argentina has to offer. Thank you for such high-quality content, delivered straight to my doorstep. The pages are like an open window, a vista into another land and a glimpse into possibilities. **SAFINA AKRAM**



TAHITI

# HOW I GOT THE SHOT

PHOTOGRAPHER AND PEARL FARMER JOSH HUMBERT DISCUSSES HOW HE CAPTURED TAHITI'S SURFERS FOR OUR JAN/FEB ISSUE



## Tell us about this image.

This is Matahi Drollet, a 25-year-old Tahitian surfer riding one of the world's scariest waves, Tahiti's Teahupo'o. Widely regarded as one of the best surfers in the area, he's the same age as my son, and is the little brother of my good friend Manoa Drollet, who I spearfish with. Matahi is the same shy and humble person he was as a 10-year-old. It's been amazing to watch him grow into the man he is today.

## How did you achieve the shot?

It was one of those moments when the conditions magically come together. I usually shoot early in the morning because the light is good and the wind often offshore, blowing the waves hollow and photogenic. On this occasion, however, it was the very end of the day. I tied up my boat, swam out and immediately got a

sequence of Ethan Ewing, a standout Australian pro. The very next wave gave me this shot of Matahi. It was taken with a Sony A7III camera fitted with a 12mm Rokinon fisheye lens, which allowed me to shoot a glorious 180 degrees — perfect for capturing hollow waves like this.


## What were the challenges at play?

The 'catch rate' with fisheyes is very low because you're shooting blind rather than looking into the viewfinder. It's more like spearfishing than photography, so you have to be precise, ensuring the horizon is level and pre-visualising where the surfer is going to sit in the frame. They're going to be flying straight at you at around 30 miles an hour, so you have seconds to shoot before diving out of the way. Usually, the best shots are taken when you're already underwater, with the camera the only thing still in the air.

## How important is developing good relationships with your subjects?

Sharing 'the tube' with a surfer is the holy grail for surf photographers, but it requires a certain synergy. A surfer can easily hit a photographer with their board. Conversely, a photographer can also injure a surfer by not getting their camera out of the way. In order to sync with your subject matter, it's helpful to form good relationships, whether that's done through being chatty with strangers or becoming part of the community. As the president of the now-dormant Teahupo'o Surf Club, it's been fun to watch so many of the kids I knew tackle one of the world's most feared waves.

View the full shoot and interview online at [nationalgeographic.com/travel](https://nationalgeographic.com/travel)

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